

Teachers: the Key Ingredient in Education Reform

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It is not enough to study macro education policies as they are articulated by governments and operationalized by centralized ministries of education. What is promised or envisioned on paper is often quite different from what actually happens in school establishments. It is important to understand, at the micro level, how schools are functioning in practice as they implement educational policies for improving the quality of education. National education reform can easily remain an abstraction while school reform focuses on practical achievements, accountability and good management. Observing how education policies play out in practice in schools demonstrates that while quality factors are additive, some individual factors make a great difference. These factors are the critical ones to identify and understand because they are the ones that need to be acted on in the short term.

A national study in Chile¹ measured school quality factors and their relation to student performance. It concluded that the two most important factors at the school level are (1) having a top-notch principal with the authority to act and (2) a stable, qualified, motivated teaching staff. Qualified, dedicated, good teaching is the lifeblood of education and made a measurable difference in student outcomes whereas high teacher turnover and low teacher qualification and interest immediately resulted in lower performance. The central problem that faces us is to train sufficient teachers and attract and retain qualified teachers and talented principals in poor or remote areas and difficult inner city schools.

Class size is an important indicator of educational quality as smaller classes allow students to receive more individual attention from their teachers. The OECD average class size for public lower secondary schools was 23.8 in 2001 but was consistently higher in Brazil, 34.5, Jamaica, 32.4, Chile, 32.3, Mexico, 30.1 Uruguay, 29.9 and Paraguay, 29.5. Helping students to make the transition from lower to upper secondary

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presents the greatest educational challenge in Latin America and the Caribbean. School size is also an important indicator of educational quality. A 2004 study of a sample of 242 recently qualified teachers in Chile, found that half the teachers were teaching in huge schools of over 1,000 pupils up to as many as 7,000 pupils. This illustrates another difficulty that new teachers have to face when trying to establish the necessary intimate connection with their pupils in order to promote good learning habits.

In the same study it was also of concern to find out how few of the new teachers had specialized in mathematics and scientific subjects. Only 19 of the 106 specialist- trained secondary teachers in the sample had been trained to teach mathematics or other science subjects. This meant that many of the teachers trained in other subjects were having to teach mathematics and science. And it should be remembered that Chile has one of the highest percentages of teachers who are qualified in the region (over 90 percent).

While the qualifications for teaching have risen over the years, it will take time for the teaching force in many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to reflect these new standards. It is also important to know whether the distribution of qualified teachers favors some regions over others as happens in Brazil with a very low proportion of primary teachers having a tertiary qualification (22 percent). In Bahia and Pará only 3 percent are qualified; in São Paulo, the highest, 42 percent. One can thus appreciate the limitations of comparing net enrollment ratios among countries which have vast disparities in the quality of their schools and teachers.