

A Regional Approach to Improving Teacher Policy: Lessons from Latin America

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Abstract

In Latin America, as in other regions of the world, the expansion of education coverage has led to concern about safeguarding the quality of instruction. In particular, the selection, training, and professional certification of teachers and the support they receive via continuous professional development remain key policy challenges. Target 4.c of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which prioritizes the need for a well-trained and qualified teaching force, provides a call to action and an international commitment to strengthening teacher quality. Reaching this target by 2030 will require collective action across countries and sectors within the education field. In this paper, we offer an overview of the current state of teacher policies in Latin America, propose a set of policy priorities to improve teacher quality in the region, and argue for a regional and collaborative approach to strengthening teacher policies.

Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aimed at reducing global poverty and inequality and protecting the planet for all inhabitants by 2030 (UN, 2015). SDG 4-Education 2030 addresses global education priorities, and target 4.c specifically establishes the need to “substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 21, target 4.c). Within the larger framework of SDG 4-Education 2030, target 4.c is considered a Means of Implementing (MOI) the seven core targets- a way of recognizing that quality teaching is an essential prerequisite for learning to occur (along with adequate infrastructure and scholarships) (UNESCO, 2015).

The purpose of this article is threefold: (a) to examine teacher policies in Latin America, using data from 14 countries, (b) to propose policy priorities to improve teacher quality in the region, and (c) to argue for a regional and collaborative approach to strengthen teacher policies. In Latin America, there has been significant progress towards other SDG 4-Education 2030 targets, such as expanding access and coverage to basic education (target 4.1) and tertiary education (target 4.3), but sustaining this expansion without sacrificing quality will require a significant increase in the supply of qualified and certified teachers (Commission for Quality Education for All, 2016). With this paper, we hope to make the case for why a regional approach, both to establish priorities for improving teacher excellence and collectively address them, can be effective, especially given the call for “international cooperation” in Target 4.c.

Much of the research and analysis in this paper has its roots in the work of the Latin American Coalition for Teaching Excellence, a group that was convened in early 2019 by three organizations working in Latin American education: the Inter-American Dialogue, the Varkey Foundation and INICIA Educación (Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2019a). The Coalition seeks to build a network of organizations and individuals committed to making the teaching profession more meritocratic and better prepared and supported. Teachers, school directors, academics, non-profit leaders and policymakers from more than a dozen countries work together to promote consensus on the necessary reforms and to provide the political and social support to implement and carry them out in a sustainable fashion (Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2019a).

Methodology

The structure, and a good deal of the content of section I (A Regional Panorama of Teacher Policies), is based upon a series of country-level reports on the state of teacher policies that the Inter-American Dialogue began publishing in 2015 (FEREMA & Inter-American Dialogue, 2015; Inter-American Dialogue, 2015). In preparation for the first

meeting of the Coalition, the convening organizations used the Inter-American Dialogue’s teacher policy reports, as well as academic literature and regional reports by multilateral organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank, to develop and respond to the policy framework questions presented in the tables in section I (Elacqua et al., 2018; Bruns and Luque, 2014; Fundación SURA-REDUCA, 2018). The information in this panorama was further validated through consultation and feedback from the members of the Coalition over the course of the first meeting in February 2019. Although the majority of countries in the region have fairly centralized education systems, there are some instances where individual states or provinces have a decent amount of autonomy in terms of how they design and implement policies. In general, we have not considered a condition to be “met” if it is only in a few sub-national regionals. However, the more detailed matrix of the panorama (housed online at http://panoramagenerallacoalicion.s3.amazonaws.com/story_html5.html) offers additional information on each categorization.

Sections II and III of this report owe much of their structure and analysis to the *Regional Agenda: Policies for Teacher Excellence*, an advocacy document produced after the Coalition’s first meeting and further developed in two additional declarations focusing on school leadership, in-service teacher professional development and initial teacher training (Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2019a, 2019b, 2020)

A Regional Panorama of Teacher Policies

In Latin America, the selection, training, and professional certification of teachers and the support they receive for continuous professional development remain key policy challenges (OREALC-UNESCO, 2015, p. 14). By 2017, in Latin American and Caribbean countries, around 89% of primary and 80% of secondary teachers were trained (UNESCO, 2018). However, levels of teacher professionalization vary between countries. Results of the TERCE evaluation in 2013 show that the average number of qualified teachers is relatively high; nevertheless, more than 20% of teachers do not have a professional education certificate (OREALC-UNESCO, 2015).

Policies vary widely between countries in the region. The following regional panorama provides an overview of the state of teacher policies in Latin America and considers five dimensions: Initial teacher education, teaching career, school leadership, continuing professional development, school leadership and teacher evaluation.

Initial Teacher Education

Most countries in Latin America use some form of standardized assessment as an admissions requirement to study education (see Table 1). In many cases, this evaluation is either a high school graduation test (for example, in Colombia, Ecuador and El Salvador) or a university entrance exam (as is the case in Brazil, Chile and Mexico).

Other admissions criteria, such as minimum GPA in secondary school, interviews or aptitude tests, are less frequently considered. Beyond simply establishing minimum entry requirements, Chile stands out for having taken additional steps to attract high-performing secondary students to the teaching profession through the *Beca Vocación de Profesor*, a scholarship for students who score about one standard deviation above the average on the national university entrance exam and decide to study education (Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2019b).

Table 1: Initial Teacher Training Policies

	Argentina	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Costa Rica	Ecuador	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Mexico	Panama	Peru	Dominican Republic	Uruguay
Standardized Test		X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X		X	
Do pre-service training programs have demanding criteria for admission?			X				X			X	X			
Interviews											X		X	
Other (Orientation process, preparation and access program, admissions course)			X				X	X			X			
Is there a framework that orients all teacher-training programs around common skills and goals?	X	X	X	X			X	X		X		X	X	
Are pre-service training programs evaluated or accredited in order to regulate quality?	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	
If pre-service training programs are accredited, have the majority of institutions received this accreditation?	X		X			X		X			X			

Ensuring the quality of teacher training institutions has been a major concern of many reform efforts. While countries have made strong efforts to establish curriculum frameworks for teacher education, there is still insufficient information regarding the implementation and relevance of these documents. Most Latin American countries have developed some form of an accreditation process for universities and degree programs, but there are only a few countries (Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala and Panama) where the majority of teacher training programs are actually accredited. In other words, while there are often quality-control mechanisms in place for initial teacher training programs, they are rarely obligatory (Chile and Ecuador being two exceptions), with few real consequences for failure to receive accreditation (Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2019b).

Teaching Career

Countries across Latin America have taken the important step of establishing clear standards for entering the public teaching force through competitive *concursos*—although, in some countries, such as Honduras, these competitions are seen as being influenced by political interests (see Table 2) (FEREMA & Inter-American Dialogue, 2015). Once teachers are hired, however, most positions are essentially permanent, and current career ladders tend to reward seniority and title accumulation instead of performance. In Colombia and Ecuador, recent policy changes have established provisional contracts

for teachers when they are first hired to ensure that they meet minimum professional standards before being offered a tenured position. Meanwhile, Chile has developed a merit-based career ladder where teachers must progress to at least the third of five steps (Advanced) or risk dismissal. For many teachers in Latin America, however, the reality is that if they want to substantially increase their salary or take on additional professional responsibilities, they will need to leave the classroom and move into school administration and management (Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2019b).

Table 2: Teaching Career Advancement Policies

	Argentina	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Costa Rica	Ecuador	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Mexico	Panama	Peru	Dominican Republic	Uruguay
Are teacher salaries competitive and paid on time?					X	X	X		X	X	X		X	
What are the requirements for a raise?	Seniority	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Certifications		X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
	Performance			X	X		X			X		X	X	
Does the system provide teachers opportunities for advancement in their careers within and outside the classroom?			X	X		X						X		
Are teachers selected on a competitive basis?	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Are there incentives for teachers to work in schools serving disadvantaged populations or teach high-demand subjects?	Economic	X	X	X	X	X		X	*	X	X	X		X
	Career						X		*	X			X	

* There is not enough evidence to make a determination

Teacher salaries remain a point of contention and tension throughout the region and can quickly subsume any other discussion of teacher policy reform. In reality, teacher salaries are a mixed bag. In Mexico and most of Central America, teacher compensation is comparable to other professions with a similar level of education and experience. In many parts of South America, however, teacher salaries remain quite low (Elacqua et al., 2018; Inter-American Dialogue, 2015).

School Leadership

School directors are frequently referred to as the “forgotten stakeholders” in education reform efforts. This may be because they are, in effect, school administrators, and not pedagogical leaders. One telling example of their lack of empowerment is the fact that many school directors are unable to make key decisions about their own teaching teams (see Table 3). Chile is essentially the only country in Latin America where principals can fire ineffective teachers—and even then, their ability to do so is limited. (Principals in Ecuador have greater autonomy in hiring their teaching staff, but lack authority to dismiss teachers) (Montt, 2012; Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2019b).

Table 3: School Leadership Policies

	Argentina	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Costa Rica	Ecuador	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Mexico	Panama	Peru	Dominican Republic	Uruguay
Are principals selected on a competitive basis based on academic and pedagogical leadership skills?	X		X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X	X
Do principals receive training and evaluations on a regular basis?	Training	X	*	X	X	X	X			X		X	X	X
	Evaluations	X	*	X	X	X				X		X		
Do principals have the authority to fire ineffective teachers and or hire new teachers for their teams?			X			X								
What are the primary responsibilities of school principals?	Pedagogical	X	X	X	X	X		X				X		
	Administrative	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

* There is not enough evidence to make a determination

A second bottleneck to developing stronger school leadership is the lack of a clear career path and professional development framework for school directors. In fact, there have been few comprehensive studies of what type of training school directors receive and its effects on student achievement (Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2019a).

Continuing Professional Development

Teachers should continue to grow and improve professionally throughout their careers, and strong professional development programs should give teachers concrete, practicable skills and knowledge that directly relate to their classroom experience in order to improve learning outcomes for their students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Yoshikawa et al., 2015; Villegas-Reimers, 2003; OECD, 2017). One significant challenge to improving professional development is the lack of rigorous data regarding teacher performance, which prevents a serious analysis of potential gaps or areas for improvement. Nevertheless, a few countries have begun taking a more data-driven approach to their professional development offerings. For example, Ecuador has begun using student results from the national *Ser* exams as an input for determining priority areas for teacher professional development. As indicated in Table 4, mentorship and coaching programs, while not yet widespread and often small in scale, can also offer critical support, especially to new teachers, and promote school-based collaboration among colleagues (Elacqua et al., 2018).

Table 4: Continuous Professional Development Policies

	Argentina	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Costa Rica	Ecuador	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Mexico	Panama	Peru	Dominican Republic	Uruguay
Is in-service training aligned with teachers' classroom needs?	X		X	X	X	X					X	X	X	X
Do teachers receive the least effective support from administrators at the school, district or other levels?		*	X	X		X				X	*	X	X	
Are there monitoring or mentorship programs for new teachers?			X	X		X				X		X	X	X

* There is not enough evidence to make a determination.

Teacher Evaluation

While there is an agreement that performance evaluations for teachers can provide important feedback, both for teachers and the education system, subsequent decisions often provoke heated debate. The result, as shown in Table 5, is that the majority of countries in Latin America have implemented teacher evaluations, but in many cases, these systems lack transparency, technical independence and impact. Several countries, notably Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, have been able to develop and implement teacher evaluation systems that are politically independent and seen as being rigorous and credible. In Chile, the national teacher evaluation includes multiple components to determine the level of performance of each teacher, and there is evidence that this system is, in fact, able to identify the most effective teachers in terms of value-added to student learning (Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2019b).

Table 5: Teacher Evaluation Policies

	Argentina	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Costa Rica	Ecuador	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Mexico	Panama	Peru	Dominican Republic	Uruguay
Is there an obligatory system to evaluate teacher performance regularly (every 2 to 4 years)?			X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	
Are there processes for teachers/principals to understand the criteria and results of the evaluation?			*	X		X							X	
Are there mechanisms to facilitate the use of these teacher evaluations in order to improve the practices of both effective and weaker teachers?			X	X		X						X		
Are the evaluation process and its criteria transparent and technically independent?			X	X		X				X		X		
Is there an independent entity that is responsible for the design, application and analysis of the evaluation tools separate from those who evaluate the teacher? Are they credible, and do they have technical capacity?			X	X		X				X		X		

* There is not enough evidence to make a determination.

For education systems that have robust teacher evaluations, a subsequent challenge is figuring out how to use the data that they produce to make decisions that are more effective for student learning. Data-informed decision-making can occur at both the school level (to help school directors and teachers reflect on their own practices) and the public policy level (to inform policymaking and provide ministries with feedback on the effectiveness of existing efforts).

How to Support Teacher Excellence

As the previous section has hopefully shown, while recent decades have seen some movement to reform teacher policies in Latin America, changes have, in general, been slow to appear and difficult to fully implement. Moreover, given the interconnected nature of the teaching profession—the need to establish a strong foundation during initial training, the importance of effective leadership, the way that evaluation can be a tool to support continuous professional development and advancement in the career ladder—

it can naturally be difficult to find a clear entry point for improvement. This section aims to lay out a clear set of priorities for fostering teacher excellence based on the gaps and weaknesses identified in the overview of teacher policies.

Initial Teacher Education

Initial teacher education is fundamental in order to set the stage for effective teaching practices in the classroom. Teachers who know their content and the best pedagogical methods to teach it will lead classrooms where more learning occurs and, ultimately, ensure better outcomes for their students. In Latin America—where initial teacher education is often regulated to meet only minimal quality standards, and few countries or programs have a clear vision for the skills and competencies that future teachers should acquire in their pre-service education—there is a clear need for rigorous, relevant and competitive initial teacher training programs that prepare sufficient numbers of educators to enter the region’s classrooms (Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2019b). As developed in the work of the Coalition, there are four areas that, at a regional level, should be priorities for concerted action:

A competency framework for new teachers: Only half of the countries in the region have a framework that establishes common goals and minimum skills for initial teacher education programs, to say nothing of the quality of these policies. All countries of the region should have a framework of teacher competencies in order to establish clear professional norms and link expectations and guidelines for initial teacher training with ministry standards. Furthermore, a regional competency framework for teacher education could strengthen consensus around the skills and knowledge that teachers should build in their initial education, and work towards better preparing teachers to enter the classroom.

Effective quality control and regulation mechanisms: There is a myriad of different systems, structures and policies that monitor and regulate initial teacher education programs and the institutions that offer them. As a result, there is little consensus about what effective quality control and regulation would look like. Nevertheless, it is clear that considerations such as accreditations of majors or institutions, effective teacher trainers and clear alignment between initial teacher training standards and national curricula can all be key tools to strengthen pre-service education (Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2019b).

Enriching practicum experiences: Teachers should unquestionably have opportunities to gain practical classroom experience before they are responsible for leading their own classrooms. To maximize the benefits of these practicum experiences, it is important that they are well structured and organized, and student teachers have opportunities to receive feedback and coaching from mentors in order to improve continuously.

Rigorous recruitment and entry requirements to ensure top candidates: Although initial teacher education in most countries involves passing some basic knowledge test, few countries have implemented more multi-dimensional or rigorous entry requirements

for the teaching profession. As a result, teaching careers often carry low social prestige and economic compensation, despite the committed work and advanced professionalism required to be an effective teacher. Countries should use a variety of different instruments (offering scholarships and bursaries, raising entry requirements, using multiple tools to determine student aptitude) in order to effectively recruit and judiciously select who should enter teacher training programs.

Professional Development

Policies for teacher professional development must be grounded in principles of constant improvement, contextualized practices and meaningful collaboration between actors. In most of Latin America today, professional development for in-service teachers is only loosely regulated with poor quality control measures and little evidence or data on its effectiveness. Furthermore, teacher experience suggests that many in-service training programs are disconnected from the immediate, daily needs of educators.

Professional development opportunities that address the pedagogical, academic and management needs of teachers at the school level: School leadership and local officials often know best the needs of teachers in their communities and should have the authority and autonomy to make decisions regarding what type of training teachers receive. A model of in-service professional development that is locally centered should also focus on building networks and relationships between teachers, rather than relying too heavily on outside providers who may not understand the context as well. These partnerships are also more likely to be sustainable over the long-term.

Best practices for teacher development that guide efforts at all levels of the education system: A common understanding of what in-service professional development should look like for teachers, what its goals and objectives are and how to achieve them is critical to ensure that professionals at all levels of the education system—from classroom teachers to ministry officials—are operating in tandem. A framework of best practices for teacher professional development can provide the orientation and shared language around which actors from all levels of the education system can act.

Mentorship programs for new teachers: Even new teachers who graduate from strong initial training programs need ongoing support and guidance when they enter the classroom full time. Mentorship programs with experienced coaches and teachers can be an invaluable tool, but school leaders must take care to select teacher mentors who are not only experienced but also effective coaches. In order to ensure sustainability, as part of their design, mentorship programs should include opportunities for direct observations and feedback, partner feedback and spaces for reflection and discussion among teachers.

Structure class schedules and teacher responsibilities so that educators have adequate time to focus on their professional development: For teachers to have the time and space to reflect and grow professionally requires a significant reorganization of the tasks and responsibilities that they currently shoulder. School leaders and education

officials must invest in giving teachers the necessary time to not only participate in professional development training and building networks with fellow teachers, but also the resources to implement what they learn in their classrooms.

Rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to measure the impact and effectiveness of teacher professional development: It is impossible to know whether professional development programs are having an impact on teacher effectiveness—and most importantly, on student learning—if they are not regularly and rigorously evaluated. Monitoring and evaluation are also a necessary tool for effectively reforming and improving existing programs. A regional research agenda focused on teacher professional development has the potential to collect and systematize data necessary for effectively implementing all of the other recommendations mentioned above (Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2020).

School Leadership

The role of school directors and the entire leadership team is essential for building confidence in teachers and providing them with the professional and pedagogical support they need to ensure quality education for their students. School directors in Latin America generally suffer from low standing and largely do their jobs in highly demanding working conditions without adequate technical support or a clear definition of their authority and functions. They also lack support to diagnose, evaluate and plan their leadership in order to ensure professional growth. To achieve effective school leadership, and thus improve education quality, four considerations should be priorities at a regional level:

Reformulate school leadership responsibilities, encouraging and supporting principals to take a leadership role in the professional development of their teachers and prioritize the pedagogical aspects of the role over the bureaucratic ones.

Define school leadership performance standards, to guide the training, selection and evaluation processes of school leaders, with a focus on the principals' primary responsibility to create a learning community that meets the needs of teachers and students.

Establish a school leadership career path, in order to recognize the unique skills, knowledge and abilities that are necessary in order to effectively lead and manage a school (Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2020).

Working Conditions and Career Advancement

Decent working conditions and career advancement opportunities for teachers are crucial for achieving excellence. Working conditions for teachers include adequate school infrastructure, as well as resources and materials, a safe environment, access to technology, and sufficient time to prepare classes and meet with other teachers. In Latin America, many teachers work in schools located in vulnerable communities with

limited access to resources or adequate infrastructure. Additionally, career advancement for teachers in Latin America is primarily conditioned on years of experience and the accumulation of certifications, rather than merit-based promotions. In order to encourage changes that are relevant and sustainable, policies must consider teachers as active subjects.

Competitive salary: Teachers deserve fair compensation for the important and professional work they do, and should receive a competitive salary in comparison to other professions with similar education and training requirements. Teachers' compensation should also serve as a way to recognize and dignify the profession.

Recruit and hire strong candidates: Improving teacher quality requires recruiting better teachers. In Latin America, this will necessitate raising the standards and requirements—whether through evaluations, interviews, incentives, or some combination of these—to enter the teaching force.

Teacher performance evaluation: Teachers should be regularly evaluated as a part of their professional growth, and the results should be used both to support their individual development and to inform decision-making at the school and policy levels. Specifically, these results should be used as an input to determine merit-based promotions.

Professional and decent school environment: Teachers should have access to the tools and resources that they deem necessary for effective instruction in their classrooms. School leadership can play a critical role in the process of building this environment, which includes a reasonable workload for teachers throughout the week and time for research and collaboration with colleagues (Coalición Latinoamericana para la Excelencia Docente, 2019a).

A Regional Approach

In today's policy environment, academics and policymakers are reconsidering the role of the teacher and placing educators at the center of the discussion on improving student learning outcomes. Following the framework established in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals set in 2015, many countries have taken action to strengthen teacher policies and more directly measure and evaluate their effectiveness. In recognizing the necessity of qualified teachers (along with adequate infrastructure and scholarships) as a prerequisite to achieving the SDG 4-Education 2030 targets, there is a clear need to create and implement public policies to ensure teaching excellence (UNESCO, 2015).

In this paper, we have put forward an ambitious set of recommendations that we believe can improve the quality, dignity and professionalism of the teaching career and, ultimately, student learning. Collaborative efforts that bring regional actors together can be effective in advocating for sustained, meaningful progress towards the objectives set out in the SDGs. Based on the experience of the Latin America Coalition for Teaching Excellence, we believe that this type of model may prove useful in other regions of the world, given the unique benefits and advantages it conveys:

- **Regional efforts bring together diverse actors around a common vision.** When key actors from different sectors can agree upon a shared goal and articulate their objectives to others, the effects can be powerful. By setting clear priorities, Coalition members are able to focus their efforts around a specific set of aims and work to deepen the agenda within their own sphere of influence.
- **Opportunities to share experiences and learn from one another.** Despite the wide array of teacher policies in place in Latin America, the reality is that many countries face similar challenges to improving the strength and effectiveness of their teaching force. The Coalition provides an opportunity for members to exchange knowledge and ideas, build meaningful partnerships across countries and learn collaboratively.
- **Build momentum and push for change in the medium- and long-term.** Effective policy change is often a slow and laborious process, and even when it is successful, there is always a risk that political necessity may limit the reach of effective reforms. In order to avoid the political gridlock or vacillating positions of political actors, the Coalition seeks to build momentum and clear-eyed focus to improve teacher policies in the medium- and long-term. While policymakers play a key role in this type of change and are essential collaborators, it is also important that the work of the Coalition is not dependent upon or connected to a single political movement or agenda.

In the year and a half since its inception, the Latin American Coalition for Teaching Excellence has produced substantial research and policy recommendations for the region. One of the key lessons has been the need to promote consensus on necessary reforms at the country and regional levels, and the importance of strengthening the reach and vision of key actors so that they have the political and social support to implement and carry out change in a sustainable fashion.

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