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# Teachers, education, and inequality in the developing world

31 Oct 2018

*Investing in teachers is key but incentivising poor parents to keep their kids in school is crucial*

When the United Nations adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, the eradication of poverty and hunger rightly took the top two spots. Goal number four following “Good Health and Well-Being” was “Quality Education” because “[more than half of children and adolescents worldwide are not meeting minimum proficiency standards in reading and mathematics](#)”.

Given that most of these young people are in LDCs (Least Developed Countries) where parents can hardly afford basic education – never mind secondary and beyond – would apprenticeships be a better way to earn a living? **Claudia Costin**, a former Senior Director for Global Education at the World Bank, believes it might not be enough in a rapidly changing world.

“The world of work is changing so much that if you don’t ensure all children the basic skills they need,” she tells *Perspectives@SMU*, “not only to work but also to be good citizens, such as basic literacy skills, mathematical reasoning, even the development of research kinds of mind, they wouldn’t be fit for an autonomous or independent adult life.

“It’s important, as the SDG4 [of Quality Education] has established, to ensure that every boy and girl has a quality education that meets international standards. It needs to ensure that they conclude primary and secondary education, and be ready to develop lifelong learning skills.”

## Teaching the teachers

Costin made those remarks on the sidelines of the recent SMU Wee Kim Wee Centre lecture “*Education and the Future of Work in the Developing World: Challenges and Opportunities amidst poverty and inequality*”. While emphasising the crucial role quality public education plays in “building equality of opportunities” in developing countries, the veteran educator highlighted the biggest lesson her native Brazil learnt when universalising primary education: teaching the teachers how to teach.

“All of a sudden we had to hire a great number of teachers who didn’t make the best teachers because they were hired in a hurry to ensure that every classroom would have a teacher,” she explains of events in 1997, nearly 30 years after South Korea had universalised primary education (the Korean peninsula pre-Korean War had similar levels of primary school access in the 1930s). “At the same time we decided to move teachers’ pre-service to the universities. Pre-service meaning the education they get in order to be a teacher. Previously it was done at a secondary level but in a technical and vocational course. It was moved to the university and that’s when we got into this mess of not properly preparing for a career and profession.

“When you prepare to be a future doctor or engineer, you prepare for a profession. For teachers it should be the same thing but no, we were just teaching them some philosophy and history of education and then sending them to classrooms with no emphasis on the practice of being a teacher.”

On top of that, a standard national academic curriculum – but also modified to account for significant geographical and cultural diversity within Brazil’s huge land area – had not been determined, resulting in teachers not knowing what to teach.

The [municipality of Sobral in the northeastern state of Ceará](#) showed the rest of the country how to achieve outstanding academic outcomes.

“What Sobral did was to fill the gaps,” says Costin, who founded and is currently the director of the Center for Excellence and Innovation in Education Policies at the Getulio Vargas Foundation (CEIPE-FGV). “They defined a very precise curriculum. They assessed learning in a way that would provide information for teachers on what the kids were not learning.

“They invested in in-service education – the education teachers get in their role as teachers i.e. what they should learning in order to teach. They did the right things step-by-step over the years, and it was wonderful.”

### **Investing in education...and eradicating poverty**

Costin elaborates that 80 of the top 100 best primary schools in all of Brazil are now found in the state of Ceará after the learnings of Sobral were implemented statewide. Replicating that success, however, has much to do with one thing: money.

“We have established a minimum salary [for teachers] even though it is still not enough,” says Costin who adds that it is “less than 50 percent of other professions that require the same education”. “Having said that, every year the salary increases above the inflation rate. It’s beginning to be corrected although not at the right speed, but it’s beginning to get corrected.”

Additionally, conditional cash transfers that pay poor parents to keep their children in schools instead of sending them off to work to help family finances help bump up the literacy rate. “This is very well-spent money,” Costin proclaims. “We are buying the future of their kids because sometimes the problem with poor parents is they prefer to send their boys to work and the girls to take care of younger siblings instead of sending them to school, due to the economic hurdles they face.

“If you pay for them to not have the kids work, it’s much more reasonable than menacing them with ‘OK, I’m sending the police in because you’re putting your kids to work.’ They don’t do it because they like it or that they don’t respect education; they just can’t afford it.”

Keeping girls in school is especially important because it keeps them from getting married or pregnant too early. The extra years in school, Costin points out, reaps great dividends in adulthood.

“Girls who have access to education take better care of their children’s health, of their parents’ health, and they have less children, which puts less pressure on the environment,” she details. “It fights poverty because if girls have access to education up to secondary, the

next generation won't be poor. It interrupts inter-generational transmission of poverty, and it contributes to a better performance in schools of their kids.

“In every sense, girls' education is extremely important and urgent.”

## **Playing catch-up**

Brazil experienced and continues to experience obstacles shared by many countries in the developing world, but the factors that spurred Sobral's success [can also be found in that of Poland, Vietnam, and Mexico among others](#). Besides paying attention to curriculum and teachers' training, certification is key.

Costin explains: “There is a great book from [education economist] Barbara Bruns called “Great Teachers” (editor's note: The full title is [Great Teachers: How to Raise Student Learning in Latin America and the Caribbean](#)) that shows that countries that have good education systems have invested in their teachers and have made access to the teaching profession much more selective. Certification is the process that would help on that front.

“Brazil does not have a national certification process...[We need] a very demanding certification process but [it should be] done step by step so it wouldn't be unfair for students that are presently getting prepared to become teachers. This way, we can send a good sign to the universities saying, ‘We will be much more selective.’ They would emphasise preparing the teachers much better than they do right now.”

If done correctly, it would significantly reduce the World Bank's estimate that it would take Brazil 260 years to reach the OECD average proficiency in reading and 75 years for mathematics. But to play catch-up while preparing children for the fourth industrial revolution, Costin says, is the real challenge not just for Brazil but the entire developing world.

“In other words, developing the 21st century skills while at the same time developing 20th century skills,” Costin states. “Very often I see comments like, ‘Since schools are not even teaching basic skills, why are we discussing about schools of the future?’ It's because the world won't wait for us.

“It's not about first becoming a 20th century country and then start thinking about the 21st century country. We have to find ways of preparing teachers that are ready to teach 20th century skills and 21st century skills at the same time.”

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