

## Teachers Commitment to Change and Effects on Students Outputs

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**Abstract** Teachers' desire for part of educational reform and its help is essential for its success and effectiveness. Based on the motivational theory of Bandura, interpreted teachers' motivation as part of educational change and recognized it using four dimensions including personal goals, common beliefs, personal beliefs, and emotional stimulation. This concept also defined the teachers' commitment to change as identifying teachers or the desire to part of the change process. Accordingly, in this study, the concept of teachers' commitment to change has been studied and its effects on emotional and cognitive outcomes of students are discussed.

**Keywords:** Teachers, Commitment to Change, Students Outputs

### Introduction

A growing number of studies are consistent in reporting that from an early age young people are capable of insightful and constructive analysis of their experiences of learning in school (ie, Rudduck et al., 1996; Nieto, 1994; Soo Hoo, 1993). However, attention is also drawn by Rudduck et al (1996:173), to the lack of scope provided by existing structures of secondary schooling for young people to exercise responsibility and take decisions over their school lives and learning. Even though teachers already take account of their pupils' perspectives, interests and needs in deciding what to do as part of their routine practice during classroom lessons (Cooper and McIntyre, 1996), the argument is very clearly articulated that secondary school pupils are not sufficiently consulted by teachers as 'co-conspirators in creating optimal learning situations' (Phelan et. al., 1992:704). Nevertheless, as coherent as this argument is, there is a very real tension between the complexity and individual responsibility of the teacher's classroom teaching task on the one hand and the need to treat pupils as partners in their own learning on the other.

Given the nature of the expertise developed and used by teachers and

adapted to the particular challenges of the classroom, what scope then remains for teachers to engage in critical collaborative reflection with pupils? What is clear is that authentic collaboration between teachers and pupils requires teachers to take account of additional information in their classroom teaching. In relation to this, we might ask whether it is realistic to expect teachers to take account of additional information while maintaining the kind of expertise which has, to date, served them well in the increasing challenges of the classroom environment (McIntyre, 1999).

My first reaction to the topic suggested for this panel was almost of surprise. It reminded me of those idealistic themes discussed in the seventies and eighties when speaking of the role of teachers and of how teachers could be prepared for this role, particularly in poorer developing countries. These views have changed today around the world partly because of the failure to prepare teachers competently for such a role. Discussions and policies centre more on how to assure that teachers perform as expected within certain parameters specified as standards, and what preparation is adequate to reach this goal, be it initial teacher education or continuing professional development. The role of teachers tends to be narrowed

(rightly according to some or narrowly according to others) to learning results of students, generally measured by national (local) and/or international tests. However, paradoxically, teachers are also asked to perform other duties that to some extent distract from specific teaching activities such as taking responsibilities for social programs that concern the people and governments: Aids, drug and violence prevention activities (often involving work with the community and parents), sex education, citizenship education, initiatives related to research and innovation that external agencies perform with teachers. The possibility that all these activities be properly carried out without burdening teachers excessively is remote if the working conditions of teachers are not adequate. Hence, faced with the topic I have had to think of forms by which we can perhaps reconceptualise the understanding of teachers as change agents in the light of the demands and contexts that exist today in many education systems.

### **Concepts related to teachers as change agents**

The issue here is the meaning and scope of teacher agency. A simple way is to say that teachers' actions are directed both to the goals of education in the wider sense of human development and in its restricted sense of teaching for learning. The specific sphere of action of teachers are institutions called schools that are set up exclusively for the purpose of teaching and learning. In relation to schools the immediate scenario of teacher activity is the classroom while the more removed one is the school community (other teachers and parents). In their sphere teachers perform actions directed to changes in knowledge, capacities and attitudes of all those with whom they come into contact; more closely their students and at some distance, their colleagues and the parents

or guardians of their students (including other community members). The observation of teaching activities by others provides different descriptions of their focus. For example, Lampert (1999) describes teachers as "dilemma managers" who must constantly make choices and decide about complex interacting variables in the dynamic social environment of the school and its neighbourhood (Berliner in Burke, 1996). Dilemmas arise when trying to assist a child to understand for example, place value in mathematics, or when they must prevent a conflict as they visualise anger building up in the classroom. Many teachers in poor contexts feel pressed to choose between apparently dichotomous values such as equity or excellence. Connell (1999) sees teachers as "frontline workers" in those schools where most students are fragile because their socio-cultural background is alien to the values and objectives that schools set for them. To perform competently and manage such situations teachers need flexibility to judge and act in order to avoid creating the conditions for exclusion of some of the students. There is also a wonderful image of the teacher as a performing actor (Sarason, 1999). Teachers must communicate with an audience and awaken feelings, reflection, questions and maybe a will to do something or change something.

As with any performing artist, the teacher willingly and internally defines a role with characteristics intended to elicit in an audience of students a set of reactions that will move them willingly to persist in the pursuit of new knowledge and skills (Sarason, 1999, 51).

This image, of course, cannot be duly enacted in coercive environments or using an authoritarian pedagogy

### **Teacher identity**

Identity is the internal face of agency, the concept that teachers have of their selves,

of who they are, how they see themselves including the meaning that others attach to their agency. Identity building is a lifetime process that is constantly constructed and reconstructed in experience (Beijard et al., 2004). How teachers see themselves and give meaning to their role affects the nature of their agency – what they do in their daily activities (in school or out of it). As we know from the literature on identity and role configuration, teachers' perception of who they are is affected by how they are viewed or by the messages they receive from those who are their referents in the work place (the school, parents, the community). This is why it is difficult to disengage teacher identity from the concept of professionalism, which over time has been a feature in the discussions about teachers and teaching. Teachers, who today are subjects of formal training and from whom initiative and responsibility for their work and results is somehow expected, in theory, see themselves as professionals. Especially, if they have had a long period of initial education and are formally regarded as professionals in their societies. Yet, teachers also know that others regard their professional condition with scepticism, they constantly hear that they should become better professionals, or should show more professionalism in their work. I will not reinstate here the longstanding discussion and research on teacher professionalism, but the concept clearly is of central importance when we consider teachers as potential change agents. What is it that makes a teacher a professional? Is it the possession of a conceptual or technical knowledge base or is it capacity or power to make decisions related to the teachers' sphere of agency? One would probably say both. Yet in practice, if the knowledge base is weak and more importantly, if there is little scope for initiative and decision making,

teachers may see themselves as non-operative professionals and blame others (especially the education system) for their inability to produce results as expected and for resisting pressures to make them accountable for that which they cannot do.

### **How do teachers perceive their identity and agency?**

Using data on teachers produced in recent studies on the teaching profession in several Latin American countries, I would like to review how teachers define their identity and how they view their role as teachers, how much they feel they are able to do and within what limitations. These perceptions give us an indication not about the extent to which teachers are change agents, but rather how they define their agency and what constrains it.

In general terms, one can distinguish three main elements that teachers use to describe themselves: teacher as a charged with a mission or a vocation, teachers as professionals defined by their work, and teachers as social agents.

The missionary component is found in descriptions of self that use words such as "commitment" and "being engaged with students' learning or well-being". This is seen as a key feature that justifies their work: "A teacher is successful if she engages in work with love, if she has commitment and vocation". To make it even more forceful, these definitions include explicitly or covertly the clause "in spite of" (low salaries or poor working conditions) and exhibit as proof of the validity of their commitment, changes or results of their students. Teachers in Nicaragua, for example, would consider themselves gratified in their work if "children learn what we teach them" or if "they manage to complete their schooling" (Elvir, 2004).

"Yesterday I heard that one of my students had been accepted into university to study

engineering. Few are accepted at that university, so this makes me very happy". (Nicaraguan teacher).

Professional identity, as distinct from the perception of what they do, is expressed by teachers in Chile, Argentina and Uruguay through concepts such as "mediators" (bridges between knowledge and students), or "facilitators" as opposed to communicators or instructors (Avalos et al., 2004; Aguerrondo, 2005, Mancebo, 2005).

Delving further into roles linked to their professional identity, Colombian teachers see themselves as intellectually dependent (Martínez, 2005), always in need of others (spokespeople) to validate their knowledge and performance. This view is

strengthened in those countries where evaluation is becoming an important event in teachers' life, and where teachers as professionals have little opportunity to show their professionalism in policies or innovation. This view was particularly strong among teachers in Nicaragua:

"... We have been relegated to a secondary role, mostly operational and have been excluded from the information, knowledge, debate and decision-making about topics and problems that concern our work" (Elvir, 2005).

To what extent are these visions of teacher professional identity and roles matched by teachers' perception of actually affecting change? As pointed out earlier, teachers refer to being gratified by the learning success of their students, implying that they feel this success is largely owed to their efforts. However, these references are to single cases. In fact, in general, teachers appear to be substantially unsure of what they achieve given the circumstances in which they work, the kinds of students they have and the poor salary and other conditions they experience. This is especially true of teachers in poorer countries as Nicaragua

and El Salvador, where it would seem that there is little (other than isolated cases) to spur them, as Sarason (1999) puts it, to see change as intellectually rewarding.

Somewhat separate from what teachers regard as their professional identity and roles, is how they perceive themselves in relation to social change. Several groups of teachers identify themselves as having a social role or being able to do something towards better social conditions such as alleviation of poverty, or social awareness about problems such as those related to violence, drugs and AIDS:

"I thought that it was all a lot colder, that teachers were only supposed to pass on subject matter content, that when one finishes a teaching day, one just goes home. I have learnt that teachers must give themselves to the community and try to become one more member of the community" (A young rural teacher in Chile).

A study by IPE/UNESCO in Argentina (Aguerrondo, 2005) noted that teachers consider that there is a place in the curriculum for social topics such as drug addiction, sex education, TV education and analysis of current social and political issues. On the other hand, while teachers regard "tolerance" as a value, in fact, the study showed that about a third of the teachers interviewed showed evidence of intolerant attitudes to homosexuals, people with AIDS, and certain type of foreigners, mostly in neighbouring countries.

Colombian teachers, faced with the question of when they would consider successful their change efforts had responses in relation to social matters such as the following:

A teacher is successful when besides effectively teaching certain knowledge contents and developing certain competencies, he or she is able to educate

(form) students, that is, help them to respect (Martinez, 2004)

Within the confines of recognising that in principle change is desirable, though with differences regarding what change areas are important or feasible, the question is the extent to which teachers are able to act as change agents. The answer to this question leads us to consider their working conditions and the physical possibility of planning and effecting change amongst their students. It also leads to us to consider how teachers view their power to change, and finally, how important do they see a role as change agents in the light of the social perception of teachers.

### **Working Conditions**

Here I use again the data of the studies in Latin America, that cover two different groups of countries: the more educationally developed south represented by Argentina, Uruguay and Chile, Colombia in the middle as a country with many differences, and the poorer group represented by the Central American countries of Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Teachers in all countries consider that their salary structure is low, that they are paid less than other professionals with the same kind of education and responsibilities. Yet there are differences among the countries. While the salary range in Colombia from the status of a beginning teacher to one who reaches the maximum salary possible falls between US\$ 255 and US\$731 per month, the range is smaller in El Salvador for teachers with university training (US\$ 409 and US\$ 592). In Argentina, where there is no national salary structure but salaries are negotiated at provincial level, there are big differences between what a teacher earns in the impoverished north of the country and what he or she earns in the richer and oil-producing region of Tierra del Fuego (US\$ 350 versus US\$ 1018 per month). Chile has a national salary that is equal for

teachers in primary and secondary schools (not the case in other countries such as Nicaragua) but reaching the top of the scale is only possible after 30 years of service compared to 10 in other countries (US\$650 to US\$ 1,000 per month).

In the context of low or inadequate salaries compared to their counterpart professionals teachers seek a second job. The lowest number of teacher working in more than two schools is reported for Argentina, Uruguay and Chile (Between 20 and 10% of teachers). On the other hand, teachers in Nicaragua to a large extent work in more than one school or have other jobs (Elvir, 2005) and the same is the case in Colombia. The number of students per class is also an indication of the level of work of teachers, and ratios are high in the poorer countries such as Nicaragua but also in Chile where teachers have up to 45 students per class and, if in full time employment, up to 40 teaching periods per week (45 minutes each).

Obviously, teachers who find it hard to make a living, who must teach in more than one school or who need to take another unrelated job, will have little time to plan for something different than routine teaching and compliance with obligations. This is not to say that there are not many examples of teachers who go beyond what is possible, as the young Chilean teachers who, after a whole day of teaching, work with parents in the evenings in adult education courses or take on responsibility for teacher development workshops in their schools (Avalos & Aylwin, 2005). A review of a small set of projects to improve teaching in Salvadorean schools also showed that rural teachers could engage in new innovative activities, if provided with resources and especially with recognition.

### **Power**

I have already mentioned the limitations to power that the current climate of

evaluation and control seem to put on teachers, despite policies that promote incentives to reward initiative and innovation. In some of the country studies to which I have been referring, teachers do not feel empowered. Teachers in El Salvador state that they are not heard by those bodies in charge of the educational reform” (Barillas and Briones, 2005). A group of Colombian teachers interviewed about what gives them professional satisfaction, rated “power” last on a list of five factors. They understood “having power” as being able to exert influence over the teaching environment and among its main actors. In her analysis of teacher interviews carried out in Nicaragua, Elvir (2005) concluded that teachers see themselves:

as the group within schools and the educational system that has the least influence and power. They do not feel encouraged to talk about their professional concerns to head teachers or to comment on directives issued by central authorities that have a bearing on their work as teachers. They regard educational authorities as a bureaucratic corps removed from the real world of schools, and largely insensitive to the needs of teachers.

Various studies of decentralisation in Nicaragua support this view of teachers as the least important factor in schools, compared for example to head teachers and parents (King & Rawling, 1999; Fuller and Rivarola, 1998 cited in Elvir 2005).

In commenting on teacher perceptions, the author of the Colombian study considers that feelings of powerlessness are due to the excessive bureaucratic controls to which teachers are subjected, and suggests the need for more space and autonomy if teachers are to be competent and innovative (Martínez, 2005). This view approximates Perrenoud’s reflection (1996) that teachers cannot act

professionally unless there is room for actively constructing change and is supported in Day, Elliot & Kington’ research (2005) on constraining factors over commitment.

### **Social recognition**

Associated with feeling empowered is how teachers view the social recognition of themselves as professionals and of their work. Public discourse tends to be evasive regarding the importance of teachers. While on the one hand teachers are valued as an important factor in the educational system, there is also a lingering view that they “are not quite up to it”. In recent years, most systems in Latin America have been reviewing their teacher education provisions and moving towards some form of continuing teacher development system yet, at the same time, spokesmen of these systems voice dissatisfaction with learning results and overtly or covertly blame them on teacher incompetence. The media tend to reflect these views, and closer to home teachers may feel that the community surrounding the school, especially parents, look down on them. For example, Fuller and Rivarola’s study on decentralisation in Nicaragua (in Elvir, 2005) suggests that the school council’s policy of monitoring and control pushes teachers to regard parents as enemies whose task it is to watch over them and punish them with dismissal if found in fault. However, it is not only in these poorer contexts with less educated teachers, that there is a perception of not being socially valued. On the basis of the results of her study, Aguerrondo (2005) concludes that teachers in Argentina feel they no longer count on being socially trusted, and have lost prestige and social recognition. On the other hand, these same teachers show a lack of trust in key social actors such as educational authorities in their ministries (national and provincial), politicians, army,

police, judges and business people.

### Conclusion

The very title of this paper presupposes that there is some agreement that teachers could or can be agents of change, but I think this discourse topic has somehow evaporated from the concerns of policy and from the descriptions of what teachers must do and be responsible for.

If one looks at the contrast in what is required of teachers in terms of their agency and what the levels of accountability that are demanded of them, there is a big gap. The following list of actions are those that teachers feel they must do or that are required of them by the educational systems to which they belong:

- To conduct the processes of education and teaching in accordance with social, cultural, moral and ethical expectations of families and society.
- To undertake and conduct the learning process of students using procedures such as planning, teaching, monitoring, developing syllabi, innovating in order to achieve the results established by the education system.
- Mediate in the interpersonal relationships of different members of the school community using dialogue, being a valid and credible partner, participating in conflict resolution, facilitating socialization of experiences, orienting parents so as to establish a climate ruled by the desire to live together..
- Exert influence on the quality of life of students and of the school community through activities that stimulate participation in both curricular and extra-curricular activities; develop feelings of belonging among students, developing their trust towards teachers and adults, stimulate solidarity..
- Design, lead and participate in activities that promote creative use of free time (cultural, sport, recreational) so as to

develop team skills, autonomy, and solidarity and therefore affect what is expected of education.

- Take part in the development of the School's Institutional Project through discussions, decision making, working with other teachers to encourage their view of teaching and learning as a single process.

- Carry and respond positively to administrative requirements directed to a better use of resources such as care for the classroom, responsibility for the furniture, equipment and other school materials; do what is demanded by the notion of working as a team, be on time, respect group norms and the school regulations. (Colombian teachers in Martinez, 2005)

This ample list of requirements is in fact what many teachers see as their sphere of agency but which, in their individual capacity, they cannot possibly attend to in its entirety. They are actions that form part of how teachers see themselves, and express what traditionally has been expected of them— in other words, they express their own identity.. However, in reality, in most teachers' lives there is a disjuncture among these views of the self and their real capacity (partly a result of training and partly of working conditions) to be change agents in the direction envisioned. Narrow forms of accountability and teacher performance evaluation accentuate this disjuncture.

Many teachers sustain their identities through occasional satisfactions, such as the unexpected success of a student, things that work in their particular school environment, and their remembrance of what motivated them to become teachers in the first place. Some of these teachers are innovators, despite difficulties or respond to innovation proposals with enthusiasm.

For teachers to become effective change agents, however, there is need for social

recognition of the complexities of teaching and of how teachers see their mission. There is also need for policy structures that provide scope for flexibility and innovation, and reward not only the specific goals of learning as measured, but the broader purpose of preparing good human beings and responsible citizens as well as the collaboration of school teams in reaching these goals. The basic underlying factor as many educators have noted is to maintain trust in teachers, and support them with the needed conditions for their work (Elkins & Elliott, 2005, Perrenoud, 1996 & Burke, 1996).

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