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Today’s teachers need to prepare students for jobs that have not yet been created, to use technologies that have not yet been invented, and to solve social problems that haven’t arisen before. Teachers have to do more than transmit educational content: they have to cultivate students’ ability to be creative, think critically, solve problems and make decisions; they have to help students work better together, by developing their ability to communicate and collaborate; they have to build students’ capacity to recognise and exploit the potential of new technologies; and they have to nurture the character qualities that help people to live and work together.

Many, if not most, of the key attributes and skills of successful teachers will only become evident once teachers begin working in the classroom. Formal, measurable skills are necessary but not sufficient; they must be complemented by the intangible qualities that are difficult to quantify, including motivation and self-efficacy. And these qualities are often enhanced as teachers improve their performance and effectiveness through professional development activities – and as education systems recognise teachers’ professionalism.

TEACHERS AS PROFESSIONALS

The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) built on international research to establish a conceptual framework for teacher professionalism. This framework describes teacher professionalism through teachers’ knowledge base, autonomy and peer networks. As results from TALIS reveal, the meaning of teacher professionalism, and the nature and extent of professionalism practices, vary significantly across countries. In general, East Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American systems grant less autonomy to teachers. This would suggest that the degree of decision making and control over school processes that teachers are accorded may be partly influenced by cultural norms. Meanwhile, only two of the education systems that emphasise peer networks are located in Europe, namely England (United Kingdom) and Romania.

To build teacher professionalism, policy makers and the profession itself must establish clearly and concisely what teachers are expected to know and be able to do. Teachers’ work and the knowledge and skills that they need to be effective should reflect the learning objectives that schools aim to achieve. There needs to be profession-wide standards and a shared understanding of what counts as accomplished teaching. In general, teachers report that their formal education prepared them well for their work as teachers. On average, 93% of teachers reported being well or very well prepared to teach the content of their subjects, and 89% feel well or very well prepared in terms of the pedagogy and the practical components of the subjects they teach, even if, in some countries, this does not square with the levels of student achievement demonstrated in the comparative PISA surveys.

Given the rapid changes in education, the potentially long careers that many teachers have, and the need for updating skills, teachers’ development must be viewed in terms of lifelong learning, with initial teacher education conceived as providing the foundation for ongoing learning, rather than producing ready-made professionals. Effective professional development activities forge a close connection between teachers’ own development, their teaching responsibilities and their school’s goals. The education policies that underpin these activities should aim to:

- prioritise the activities that have the greatest impact on teachers’ practices
- include teachers in decision making at school
- strengthen peer collaboration through induction programmes and mentoring
- build a collaborative school culture
- support a culture of student assessment
- strengthen the links between teacher appraisal and professional development
- link professional autonomy with a collaborative culture
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- involve teachers in developing professional standards
- strengthen teacher leadership
- engage teachers in education reform
- build teachers’ capacity to use technology innovatively and effectively in the classroom.

MOVING FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

Implementing reform of any kind, in any sector, is never easy; but it is particularly difficult in the education sector. Assessing the relative costs and benefits of education reform is rendered particularly difficult by the large number of intervening variables that influence the nature, size and distribution of those benefits. It is rarely possible to predict clear, identifiable links between policies and outcomes, especially given the lag involved between the time at which the initial cost of reform is incurred, and the time when it is evident whether the intended benefits of reforms actually materialise.

As a result, there are a lot of stakeholders in education who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Even small reforms can involve massive reallocations of resources, and touch the lives of millions on both the client and provider sides. This rules out “reform by stealth” and makes it essential to have consensus, or at least broad political support, for any proposed reform. In essence, education reform will not happen unless educators endorse and implement it.

Several policy lessons have emerged from OECD countries that have implemented reforms in education:
- Policy makers need to strive for consensus about the aims of education reform and engage stakeholders, especially teachers, in formulating and implementing policy responses, without compromising the drive for improvement.
- External pressures can be used to build a compelling case for change.
- All political players and stakeholders need to develop realistic expectations about the pace and nature of reforms to improve outcomes.
- Reforms need to be backed by sustainable financing.
- There is some shift away from reform initiatives per se towards building self-adjusting systems with feedback at all levels, incentives to react and tools to strengthen capacities to deliver better outcomes. Investment is needed in change-management skills. Teachers need reassurance that they will be given the tools to change and the recognition of their professional motivation to improve their students’ outcomes.
- Evidence from international assessments, national surveys and inspectorates can be used to guide policy making. Evidence is most helpful when it is fed back to institutions along with information and tools about how they can use the information to improve outcomes.
- “Whole-of-government” approaches can include education in more comprehensive reforms. These need to be co-ordinated with all the relevant ministries.