The social standing of teachers

The social status of the teaching profession is in decline and pay levels are diminishing. Working conditions no longer attract the most gifted students, or encourage the best teachers to remain in the profession. While society expects more and more of education and teachers, what compensation can teachers reasonably expect in exchange?

The job of teaching has become ever more complex and demanding. But despite general recognition of the importance of teaching, few concrete measures are being taken to improve teachers' social standing—particularly from the financial point of view.

Experience has shown, however, that it is no longer possible to maintain this double standard of rhetorical recognition on the one hand and a real decline in working conditions on the other. It was with this in mind that International Teachers' Day was declared by UNESCO and celebrated for the first time on 5 October 1994. On that day, the Director General of the Organisation, Federico Mayor, stressed that "teachers are often under-estimated" and that educational reform should go hand in hand with improving their status.

As far back as 1966 UNESCO and the International Labour Organisation adopted a Recommendation on the Status of Teachers, where it was stated that the status of teachers should be commensurate with the needs of education as assessed in the light of educational aims and objectives; it should be recognized that the proper status of teaches and due public regard for the profession of teaching are of major importance for the full realization of these aims and objectives.

Commentators from all sectors of the teaching profession and from all regions are virtually unanimous in believing that this status has not improved since 1966.

Working conditions

The will that has been evident in many regions of the developing world to ensure assess to primary education for all has resulted in large-scale recruitment of teachers. This recruitment has often had to make do with limited financial resources and has been accompanied by a serious decline in the social prestige of the profession and in its living conditions. The enquiry conducted by the International Bureau of Education in its member states, in preparation for the recent session of the International Conference on Education (1996), confirmed a very clear lowering of teachers' living standards, in both industrialised and developing countries.

Cost-cutting policies also advocate more intensive employment of teachers, which means an increase in class sizes and teaching hours per teacher. This teaching overload has worsened in several industrialised countries and has reached an unaccetable level in many developing countries. In Malawi, for example, it is not unusual for a primay school teacher to have 150 students. Further examples may be found in South Africa and Uganda, where some schools practice a system of alternating clases, that is to say, the same person teaches two classes, one in the morning and another in the afternoon.

It is true, as many studies have shown, that up to a certain point increase in class size per teacher does not necessarily lead to a lowering in the quality of results. But achieving a positive ratio between class size and quality depends on a change in the teacher's working methods. Working efficiently with large classes implies using "non-frontal" methods of teaching. This can be achieved by introducing self-teaching student course books, so as to free the teacher from the actual task of transferring information and to enable him either to offer personalised attention to his students or to devote himself more directly to small groups.

Declining pay

Throughout the world, there is a clear link between teachers' status and their working conditions, especially their pay. It is argued that higher levels of pay would better reflect their status and that of education in society.

In developing countries, however, the implementation of structural adjustment policies has led to drastic cuts in education budgets. Since teachers' pay accounts for the largest part of public spending on education in all countries (80 per cent in most countries and often 90 per cent in the least advanced), the principal means of reducing costs is by cutting salaries.

The lowering of teachers' living standards is more marked in developing and transition countries, where salaries may be paid irregularly, sometimes with a delay of several months. Furthermore, in certain countries or during certain periods, when pay rises do occur, they are cancelled out by inflation.

In fact, in many areas of the world, it is not unusual to find that teachers are at the bottom of the pay scale, forcing many of them to seek second jobs to make ends meet.

Yaotse Agbalegno, a Togolese teacher, works at a public primary school in Kitidjan on the outskirts of Lome, the capital of Togo. There, he has to cope with 80 intermediate level students, aged from 9 to 14. With his salary of 80 dollars a month, already insufficient to cover household expenses, he must also on occasion buy basic school materials. In order to improve his pupils' results, he offers them extra lessons, which brings in some 20 dollars more a week. "If the State gives us the means, we can achieve small miracles," he says. Like many of his Togolese colleagues, Mr. Agbalegno found that a little inventiveness could help offset his financial difficulties, so he has taken to running a stand selling audio cassettes and he sells his students addresses of foreign pen pals.

Teachers' salaries are in fact low compared to those paid in other sectors requiring a similar standard of qualifications. This is depressing for teachers, doing little to instil a feeling that they are members of an important professional group.

According to a study carried out by Gabriele Gottelmann-Duret and Joe Hogan, on the management of primary teaching staff in Sub-Saharan Africa, teachers' morale is directly proportional to their pay. This is the case in Uganda, where teachers receive a little over 400 dollars per annum on average, that is to say ten times less than their colleagues in the private sector, for an equivalent level of qualification. In South Africa, on the other hand, starting salaries are in the range of 7000 to 13000 dollars per annum, which means that they earn as much as a private secretary and half as much as an electrical engineer in the private sector.

Pay and professional performance

Although there is general agreement regarding the need to improve teachers' pay and working conditions, there are more doubts when it comes to deciding how this should be done. Generally speaking in most countries teachers' pay is related to the level of their initial training and the number of years they have worked. However, many studies demonstrate that these two variables are not necessarily related to the quality of the results obtained nor to the professionalism of the teaching provided. Solutions tried out in some countries relating pay to students' results proved very difficult to apply due to the multiplicity of factors involved in learning apart from the teachers themselves.

Other more complex formulas are now being examined in discussions, such as significantly better pay for teachers working in difficult areas, regular retraining with pay increases rewarding continuing in-service training, special bonuses for innovation or far so-called "institutional" work, etc. In other words, the idea is to introduce criteria more closely related to teaching quality and not exclusively to seniority. However, as it is difficult to assess personal merit, the attempt to link part of pay to the value of teachers' performance has not yet been made much progress.

Symbolic recognition

Education is one of the most important investments that each society can make for the future. In 1992, the estimate of global public spending on education, as a percentage of gross national product, barely exceeded 5 per cent. The International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, chaired by Jacques Delors, and UNESCO set the target at 6 per cent of GNP. This would necessitate an increase in most countries' investments in education, from both public and private sector funding.

UNESCO instituted International Teachers' Day to improve the status of and respect for the profession, which it considers to be the most important in the world. In so doing, it calls on national bodies and the international community to become more aware of the problems of teachers and to implement policies ensuring them a proper professional status and satisfactory working conditions, which are both indispensable if maximum efficiency is to be achieved. This is reflected in the following extract taken from the recommendations of the International Conference on Education:

"However, it should be noted that very often teachers' living and working conditions are not in keeping with the critical importance of their task. For this reason, particular attention should be paid to this aspect and no effort should be spared to give priority to education in development plans and to improve the status of teachers."

It not easy to identify exactly what measures are needed to solve the problem of the status of teachers and to determine how it can be improved. It does, however, seem clear that teachers are no longer to be motivated with purely symbolic recognition.—Source: UNESCO

The Bangladesh Times