

World Teachers' Day 2021

Teachers at the heart of education recovery

Concept note



5-8 October 2021

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Introduction

One and a half years into the COVID-19 crisis, World Teachers' Day will focus on the support teachers need to fully contribute to the recovery process. Owing to the global context and following the spirit of the international benchmarks on the status of teaching personnel, this year's observation of World Teachers' Day will focus on the effect that the pandemic has had on education and on teachers, as well as the steps that need to be taken to ensure that teaching personnel develop their full potential to play the role expected of them in recovering from the pandemic and achieving the 2030 global education goal (SDG 4)¹.

This global advocacy day will be observed around the world with the main objective of calling on governments and the international community to focus on the situation of teachers around the world and the challenges facing the teaching profession, and to share effective and promising policy responses.

¹ [Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning.](#)

Why is this theme important?

Never have teachers been more wanted and needed than today. The educational disruptions and school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have confirmed the crucial role of teachers in maintaining learning continuity, but also in sustaining the very dynamics of households, families and communities. During the current crisis, we have witnessed how teachers have been at the heart of educational responses: they have provided online teaching and learning; they have prepared take-home packages for students living in rural and remote areas that lack the connectivity and technologies needed to pursue online learning; they have adapted their practices and diversified the formats, means and contents of education to cater for the needs of learners, including their socioemotional well-being; and they have preserved and reinforced social interaction among learners, fellow teachers and school communities, often checking in on students via social media and messaging systems, and exchanging practices and resources with other practitioners, enhancing a sense of community within the profession.

As a result, parents, communities, and education systems have engaged in discussions of the importance of teachers that could contribute to develop a renewed appreciation of teachers and their vital role in educational recovery and in supporting the social, economic and cultural life of societies. However, this high regard for the work of teachers is not fully reflected in current policy measures and resource allocation for recovery (UNESCO, 2021²). Yet, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted major challenges for the teaching profession, including: the lack of professional development opportunities in online teaching and distance learning; increased workloads associated with double-shift classes and blended and face-to-face teaching, among others; increased use of contract teachers; and cases of private school and community teachers going for months without pay or being dismissed. In terms of occupational safety, while teachers and education personnel need to be prioritized as frontline workers in COVID-19 vaccination schemes to encourage school reopening, to date, only 21 countries (out of 197 for which there is information) actually prioritize teachers in the first phase of vaccination plans. More structurally, in many countries this high regard is not reflected in teachers' status and the social standing of the profession, its working conditions, support and overall financing. As a result, teachers are seldom consulted or invited to participate in decision-making and policy formulation processes. Even though a plethora of studies and reports have concluded that teachers have a direct impact on students' learning and well-being, and that teacher quality – beyond the socioeconomic conditions of students and the context of the educational process – is the single most important in-school factor influencing student achievement, teachers remain underrecognized and underappreciated. A consequence of this lack of recognition is the fact that the teaching profession is not one of the most appealing careers for the best students going into tertiary education.

This situation is all the more worrying since a shortage of teachers has been affecting the world for more than a decade. According to projections from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), in order to ensure universal primary and secondary education by 2030 (SDG target 4.1), 69 million more teachers are needed worldwide: 24 million for primary and 44 million for secondary education. Teacher shortage is most acute in sub-Saharan Africa, where 70% of countries face shortages at primary level and 90% of countries at secondary level (UIS, 2016³). The demographic growth in this region further illustrates the challenge, as the number of six- to 15-year-olds is projected to increase by 60% over the next 30 years,

² UNESCO, 2021: "[UNESCO urges all countries to prioritize teachers in national COVID-19 vaccine rollout plans to ensure education can continue safely and schools remain open](#)"

³ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), 2016: "The world needs almost 69 million new teachers to reach the 2030 Education Goals", Fact sheet No.39

from just over 280 million in 2020 to approximately 450 million in 2050 (UNESCO, 2021⁴). This does not take into account the needs of other levels of education, such as early childhood or tertiary education, which are also facing shortages of teachers and educators. If the teaching profession's attractiveness and the actual recruitment of teachers do not improve urgently, the situation will be even more problematic. The shortage of teachers is a reality that wealthier countries and regions also face. Based on demographic data, UIS estimates that while sub-Saharan Africa needs to recruit 17 million primary and secondary teachers by 2030, South Asia needs to recruit 15 million and developed countries 11 million (UIS, 2016).

Beyond the working conditions and remuneration of teachers – which in most countries do not stand comparison with professions requiring the same level of education, responsibility and workload – another deterrent for youths entering the profession and for in-service teachers to deploy their talent is the mushrooming of accountability regimes that constrain teachers' agency, autonomy and decision-making power, and ultimately render the profession less attractive and intellectually rewarding, thus causing many teachers to abandon the profession. Some of the measures adopted over the last few decades to improve learning and to enhance the monitoring of learning outcomes have in fact had the perverse effect of constraining the art of teaching by curtailing the spaces where teachers can exercise their professional autonomy and leadership. The rise of quality assurance mechanisms designed without teacher input, such as large-scale testing, performance-based teacher evaluation systems, school inspection, prescribed curriculum and rigid teaching standards are measures, among others, that have increased teacher workloads and constrained the art of teaching.

These forms of accountability undermine the very work that teachers are called to do – to guide learners to understand and transform the world and instil a sense of belonging and responsibility – and contradict claims that teachers should be creative, adaptive and innovative. Ultimately, these forms of control threaten to narrow the curriculum and water down the authoritative role of teachers in society.

Preparing and supporting teachers to be at the heart of education recovery

For the post-pandemic recovery phase, it is essential to restore the role of teachers as key actors in rebuilding more adaptive education systems that are resilient against future shocks, and ensure equity and inclusion for all learners at all times. This is why the Global Education Meeting's Ministerial Segment set as a priority the provision of support to all teachers and education personnel as frontline workers, consulting their representative organizations in decision-making, and ensuring their safety, well-being and decent working conditions. This is also why UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank launched a joint mission – [Mission: Recovering Education in 2021](#) – focusing on supporting teachers, enabling all learners to return to school and to catch up on learning.

The transformations that we have witnessed in education and the challenges described hitherto call for new forms of policy support for teachers for an effective recovery that leaves no one behind and that builds foundations for resilience-building and reimagining education. The policy support that is needed covers several areas, including teachers' professional development, participation in decision-making and working conditions.

In terms of **professional development**, this means meeting teachers where they are and supporting them to improve their practices, trusting the pedagogical judgement of trained and experienced teachers and equipping them with the skills to use educational technologies to support learning and a shift to hybrid teaching and learning, adapting content and pedagogical practices to a diversity of

⁴ UNESCO, 2021: A snapshot of educational challenges and opportunities for recovery in Africa

learners with different needs, wants and aspirations. This includes levelling learning to make up for interrupted educational pathways, adapting and contextualizing education to teach at the right level, and taking into account the learning losses and gains that might have been produced during the pandemic. This requires specific pedagogical knowledge to assess learning at classroom level and to adjust the curriculum to tailor teaching to different needs. These are elements that need to be embedded in **teacher education** so that new practitioners are better prepared for future crises and for taking advantage of technological developments and the possibilities they offer to enrich and individualize teaching to meet the needs of all learners.

When it comes to **governance and participation**, we encounter, perhaps, one of the biggest challenges facing education systems today: to create channels for the participation of teachers and their organizations in educational decision-making, and to share the knowledge they produce in the classroom at different levels of education governance and management, including through social dialogue, participation in governing bodies of education institutions and in networks and communities of practice.

In terms of **working conditions**, teachers need to work in healthy, safe and enabling environments that are free from prejudice, including gender-based discrimination, and furnished with safety, decent working hours and remuneration, and career development opportunities. Not only would this promote the status of the profession, but it would also improve recruitment, retention, motivation and, ultimately, student learning.

Finally, these policy areas need to support all teachers in a **lifelong perspective**, from novice to experienced teachers and from early childhood educators to higher-education professors, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), adult education and literacy practitioners. This also entails professional development as a continuum from pre-service education to induction, mentoring and in-service teacher education, combining several learning settings including online training and through engagement in communities of practice. This approach can ensure that the SDG 4 target on increasing the supply of qualified teachers remains a compass for policy action and international cooperation, and that teachers remain at the heart of education recovery.

World Teachers Day Celebrations

This year, World Teachers' Day celebrations will take place in conjunction with the meeting of the Joint ILO-UNESCO Committee of Experts on the Application of the Recommendations concerning Teaching Personnel (CEART), which will be running from 4 to 8 October 2021. Both events will be leveraged to increase the visibility of the theme and to promote best practices.

To celebrate World Teachers' Day, UNESCO, together with its co-convening organizations, ILO, UNICEF and Education International (EI), and its partners, the World Bank, the Hamdan Foundation, the International Taskforce on Teachers for Education 2030 (TTF), members of the Global Education Coalition and in-country Local Education Groups (LEGs) will organize global, regional and national events and an advocacy campaign through social media for wider public engagement.

This will include a five-day series of global and regional events including panel discussions, workshops and webinars to examine effective policies, evidence and practices to provide the support teachers need for successful recovery, resilience-building and reimagining education in the post-pandemic world, and to advance SDG 4. Individual countries' celebrations may take place over a longer period, depending on national customs and context. A calendar of events will be published online and updated regularly.

World Teachers' Day celebration events will actively engage governments, local authorities, teachers from various contexts and professional backgrounds, traditional and social media, students, parents and the wider public. In particular, this will include mobilization of UNESCO Field Offices and Institutes worldwide as well as National Commissions for UNESCO, the Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC), the UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPnet), the UNEVOC Network and UNESCO Chairs to convene learners and teachers to mark the day.

Why a World Teachers' Day?

World Teachers' Day was instituted by UNESCO, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and other partners, on 5 October 1994, to commemorate the anniversary of the adoption of the 1966 ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers.⁵ This international recommendation sets out the rights and responsibilities of teachers, as well as standards for their initial training, continuing professional development, recruitment, employment, and teaching and learning conditions. It also contains numerous recommendations for teacher participation in educational decision-making through social dialogue and negotiation with educational authorities. In addition to this historic achievement, World Teachers' Day also commemorates the adoption, in 1997, of UNESCO's Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel,⁶ which sets out the rights and responsibilities of teaching staff in higher education, as well as the ILO Policy Guidelines on the Promotion of Decent Work for Early Childhood Education Personnel, adopted in 2014.⁷

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, in particular Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on education, and the Education 2030 Framework for Action, further confirms the critical role of teachers in achieving the Education 2030 Agenda. It has thus dedicated one specific target (SDG target 4.c⁸) to teachers.

⁵ ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers (1966) and UNESCO's Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997) – Revised edition 2016, International Labour Office, Sectoral Policies Department, Geneva, ILO, 2016. (https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/normativeinstrument/wcms_493315.pdf)

⁶ Idem

⁷ [ILO Policy Guidelines on the promotion of decent work for early childhood education personnel](#)

⁸ SDG target 4.c reads "By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States"