

Elaqua, G., Hincapié, D., Vegas, E. & Alfonso, M. (2018). *Profesión: Profesor en América Latina, ¿Por qué se perdió el prestigio docente y cómo recuperarlo?* Washington DC: Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo. ISBN 978-1-59782-314-2 (Rústica), 978-1-59782-315-9 (Digital) DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.18235/0001172>

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Profession: Being a teacher in Latin America, why was the prestige of the teaching profession in Latin America lost and how to recover it?

The book written by Elaqua et al. (2018) presents throughout eight chapters the main challenges the teaching profession is facing in Latin America. This study was conducted reviewing the characteristics, educational policies and reforms occurring in the following Latin-American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru. Neither of these countries had succeeded in attracting the most talented and skilled teachers to public educational systems, nor do they depict a desirable performance in standardised tests as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). This book focuses both on describing teachers as the most relevant element in the learning process, and emphasises the importance of the training programmes of pre-service teachers.

This book starts characterising the educational situation in Latin America, where the access to formal instruction has risen up to 96%, regarding primary level, and to 76% in secondary school. Although the democratisation of education has allowed students from

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traditionally-excluded groups to attend formal education, it has not guaranteed the quality of the instruction service. Among the different reasons of this failure in schooling, the authors agree in highlighting the role of teachers in this process. To explain the causes of the loss of prestige of the teaching profession, the authors analyse the historical evolution of the educational system in Latin America, as well as the changes in the labour market; mostly influenced by woman access to tertiary education. The first part of this book offers a diagnosis of current educational contexts in these countries, which are described more-in-depth in the first three chapters.

The first chapter describes the teaching profession as unattractive to most secondary school graduates, who choose programmes with more social prestige as law, engineering or medicine. In fact, the authors report that those choosing to study education obtain low scores in the university entry exams and consider this profession as affordable with their academic performance. Not surprisingly, vocational interest or motivation is not considered when deciding to become a teacher. The low income earned by education professionals, added to the little possibility of making a career out of teaching, discourage many when finishing secondary education who find other careers more profitable. The authors also acknowledge the fact that teachers, nowadays, often come from low socioeconomic backgrounds; becoming education the only alternative to enter university and to be prepared to face requirements of globalised society.

Contrary to the 60s when being a teacher meant prestige and knowledge, even authority in rural contexts, this profession is one of the least socially valued in these days. It does not reward the effort made by the educational community and, therefore, many families are against the decision of their children entering teacher-training programmes. The second chapter refers to the expansion of schooling and the changes experienced by the teachers in the last years. Public policies, demographic growth and urbanisation have reshaped Latin American societies, who aimed at granting public education to all their citizens. However, political decisions influenced schooling as an objective to be achieved in the short-term period. The latter led to more flexible requirements to become teachers and a deregulation of

teacher-training programmes in many countries. The authors identify the short-duration programmes offered by private institutions as the first cause of the loss of prestige and deprofessionalisation of the teaching profession, being observed simultaneously in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Ecuador and Peru. Even though this initiative aimed at providing society with more graduated teachers, their training process was of low quality and could not stop the decrease in the enrolment rate at local universities.

The third chapter informs about the changes occurring within the labour market, especially in terms of women accessing higher education. Traditionally, teaching was considered a woman's job as it was the only option they had to go further primary education. This was encouraged by Latin American governments as their lower incomes were more profitable if compared to men's. Consequently, women represented 70-80% of the student population of teaching programmes. However, women could later diversify their work opportunities to offices and the industry, obtaining better paid salaries and becoming more interested in enrolling other programmes as law, medicine or engineering. The teaching profession is not anymore representative of social status or high-quality standards, discouraging the more talented from teaching training programmes.

The second part of this book refers to the reform policies conducted by these countries in the recent twenty years, aiming at regulating the teaching profession to improve the quality of schooling and teacher-training programmes standards. The fourth chapter narrates the initiatives directed by these Latin American governments, based on meritocracy and teachers' performance evaluation; switching the paradigm of professional development and seniority as indicators of effective teaching. These educational reforms focus on three major aspects, which are detailed in the next paragraphs: (1) make the teaching profession more attractive to university candidates, (2) improve the initial training of future teachers at university, and (3) select the best candidates for the teaching career and assist the new professionals joining it.

Regarding the first goal of the educational reform, two major areas are described. Meritocracy is understood as a mechanism that

encourages teachers to be more effective, embracing them into continuous professional development. Besides classes, teachers can now be in charge of different functions as teacher-support, management, research, etc.; based on a hierarchical organisation that rewards the teachers' effort and their effectiveness. Assessment plays in this scenario an important role, as it can reward or punish these professionals, based on their performance. This has unfortunately generated some conflict with trade unions and teachers' organisations. Another aspect considered is the increase in teachers' salaries, which were stuck since the 80s. Competitive initial salaries would make this profession more attractive and would invite the most talented secondary graduates to decide for the teaching career. According to the authors, teachers can double their salaries after 15 years in Chile, 10 in Mexico and 16 in Peru. Finally, working conditions were also considered here, such as policies that improve infrastructure, number of students in each classroom, number of working hours, etc.

The second goal focuses on improving the training of pre-service teachers, in order to make them more prepared for their future demands and challenges. In general terms, all countries agreed in defining a minimum of 4-year duration of an undergraduate degree and in raising selectivity standards to enter initial teaching-training programmes. Another aspect reviewed is scholarships and credits given by the government to enrol in certified education faculties in these countries. Regarding the latter, accreditation by national entities has become a requirement for undergraduate programmes. Two models have been described, one imposing a curriculum from the government to the institutions and the other focusing on results based on the exit profile of each programme. For instance, Chile has incorporated tests at the beginning and at the end of the career studies as a means of evaluating the graduates' competences, according to the second model. Finally, practicum and continuous reflection have been incorporated in the initial programmes as one of the core elements of teacher-training.

The third goal describes policies to select the best and more talented candidates to join the teaching career and strategies to assist them in this initial period; based on the premise of effective teachers adding

value to students' learning processes. In terms of effective teaching, disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge, leadership and didactics are more valued than formal qualifications. Therefore, written tests, interviews and demo sessions are required when applying for a job position in the area; considered to be more rigorous if compared to previous selection processes. For instance, 17% of applicants in Colombia, 50% in Mexico, 25% in Ecuador and only 13% in Peru succeeded in passing these evaluations. Additionally, the authors mention the school allocation process as a conflictive issue, as the teachers with higher scores can freely choose the institution they will be attending, which does not necessarily need the most talented and skilled professionals. Finally, induction and mentoring processes are considered crucial to support new teachers while incorporating to the school system, fostering teacher retention rates in public schools.

The eighth chapter focuses on the challenges that future teachers may encounter and how prepared they are for them, mostly in terms of the educational reforms. Despite teacher salary improvement, there is still a considerable gap if compared to other professionals which makes this alternative unattractive. The dismissal possibilities after failing the teaching evaluations represent another challenge, as it requires support from teachers to be maintained throughout time. University autonomy and the high number of undergraduate programmes hinder quality supervision and control from the government, which needs to be coordinated due to the geographical and social features of each of the countries involved in this study. Therefore, substantial changes in the educational system are required to ensure quality in the formation process and raise the standards of children education in the region. The characteristics or skills of future teachers that predict their effectiveness require special attention according to the authors, so that appropriate and contextualised accompanying strategies are developed.

Although this book provides a comprehensive description of the educational phenomenon in Latin America, reviewing key factors as the expansion of schooling coverage and the changes in the labour market, a more profound analysis of the educational context in each country is required. Not only are the latter responsible for the teach-

ing situation in Latin America and problems local education is facing nowadays, but a characterisation at both school and classroom level is required. Precarity in the teaching market with unstable contracts and low salaries, top-down educational reforms, as well as large classes are some factors that might explain the difficulties teachers experience. More characterisation at a microlevel, both considering the voice of teachers as actual agents of the educational system and the current changes occurring in each of the countries before mentioned, are required to understand the crisis in the teaching profession and the loss of its prestige.

The authors succeed in providing a throughout description of situations experienced by teachers in different countries, making this topic comprehensible even to readers not familiarised with educational or teaching contexts. It is interesting that the authors revisit the teachers' issue as a doubt society has with these professionals, and how social transformations can influence their roles and duties. However, the findings and recommendations given in this book cannot be generalised without any contextualisation. We are living in a globalised and technologized society, which changes constantly and challenges us to be prepared to our current students' realities, needs and interests. In conclusion, transformation of teachers' role and adaptation of this profession in line to current demands and technological developments are required to successfully face future challenges and, hopefully, recover the prestige of the teaching profession in Latin America.

Recibido: 20.08.2019 Aceptado: 25.08.2019