

# *Preparing teachers for inclusive education in Latin America*

*Denise Vaillant*

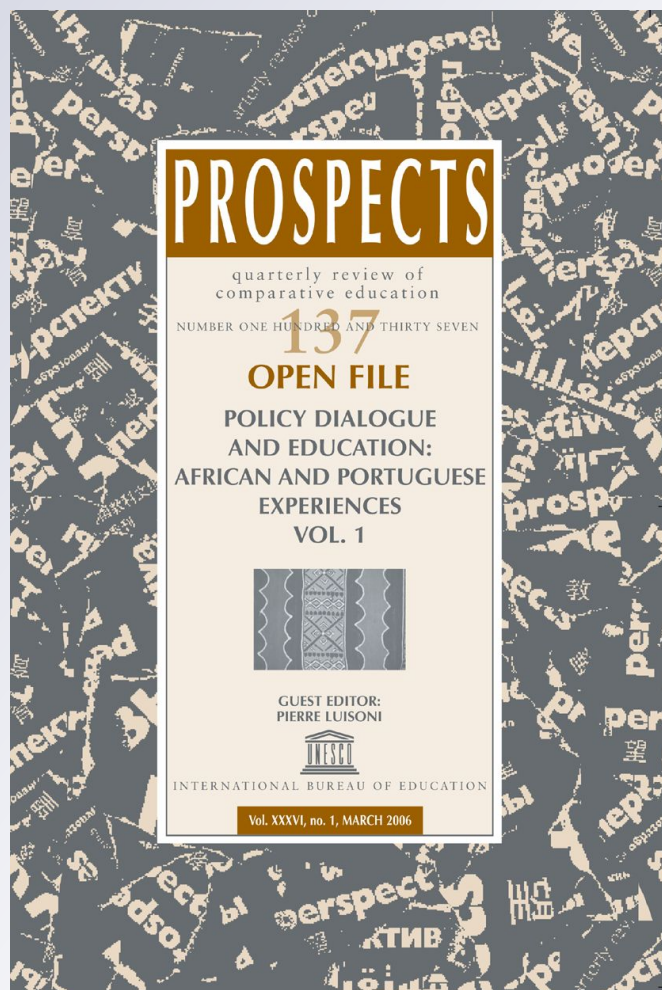
## **PROSPECTS**

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## Preparing teachers for inclusive education in Latin America

Denise Vaillant

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**Abstract** This article analyzes the current challenges facing inclusive education in Latin America and explores some possible solutions. The author suggests that teachers play a key role in providing education that is inclusive for all. In Latin America, today, however, inclusive education often does not respond to the needs of children and young people, and teachers often finish their professional training without acquiring the skills they need to work with children and young people living in difficult circumstances. Teachers also need incentives to work in remote or difficult geographical areas, and they benefit from national efforts to improve their status, including awards for innovative work. Much remains to be done, but the training of teachers for a more inclusive education system is gradually being incorporated as part of the educational policy agenda in Latin America.

**Keywords** Inclusive education · Latin America · Teacher education

The exclusion of children and adolescents from the education system is a complex issue that has been widely researched and analyzed in recent decades. Recent studies in Latin America focus on issues of inequality and education in light of the processes of social and economic transformation and their effects on vulnerable groups of children and young people who are, for various reasons, less likely to remain in the system and complete their basic education (Terigi et al. 2009). Broadly speaking, assessments using both quantitative and qualitative approaches have found that various social, economic, and pedagogical-institutional factors interact to exclude students from the educational system and lead to academic failure for those in the system, thereby hindering the right to education for every child. This article describes the complicated nature of the problem of inclusive education in Latin America and explores some possible solutions. The approach taken here focuses not on the complex socio-economic causes of exclusion, which are of course vitally important, but rather on what can be more immediately transformed: the school setting and the teachers themselves.

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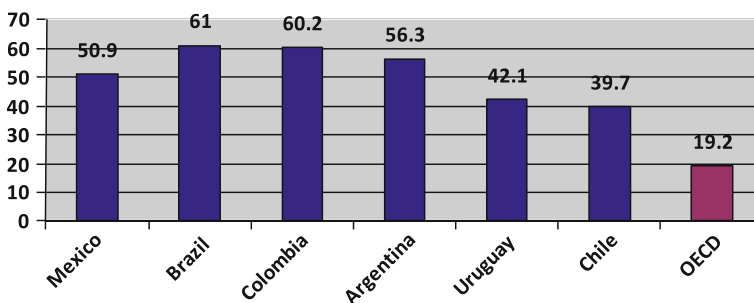
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Making education inclusive is a very difficult task that can easily lead to failure unless all parties acknowledge the pivotal role of the classroom teacher. The teacher is a vital partner in the development and success of inclusive education. However, in Latin America today inclusive education is not congruent either with the needs of children and young people, or with the competences that teachers acquire in their professional training. I argue that the solution is not simply a matter of developing adequate competences and capacities in teachers. The problem is far more complex and demands changes in educational policies that strive to improve teachers' social status and foster adequate professional preparation for inclusive education. In this article I briefly review the current educational scene in Latin America and then describe two fundamental challenges facing educational policy makers in the region: the low status of teachers and the inadequacy of teacher education. I then describe diversity in inclusive education in Latin America, offer some recent examples of good practice—teacher awards and new trends in teacher education—and conclude by suggesting some possible courses of action.

### A complex scenario of change

The educational systems in Latin America have undergone considerable change over the last 20 years. During the 1990s practically every country in Latin America introduced reforms that have shaped the current education scenario: institutional changes, systems for evaluating learning results, revisions of curriculum content, attempts to improve managerial skills and offer teachers incentives, and the application of strategies designed to improve the equity and quality of teaching. However, transformation is a long and difficult process—and many countries have not made much visible progress.

However, some countries like Uruguay and Argentina have succeeded in boosting enrolments and lengthening the duration of schooling. Pupil enrolment has grown markedly. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the quality of education. In absolute terms, Latin Americans have consistently performed below average on international evaluations such as TIMMS, IEA, and PISA (Vaillant 2007). In fact, the achievement levels of Latin American countries are lower than those of countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The assessments available for some countries that participated in PISA (2006) indicate that learning outcomes in the Latin American region are well below the average for developed countries. This achievement gap is evident in Fig. 1, which compares the percentages of students in various countries whose science scores were inadequate.



**Fig. 1** Percentage of students who earned inadequate scores on the PISA science test. Source: PISA (2006)

Although many explanations have been offered for the differences in student achievement, one of the most important is a shortage of qualified teachers in math and science (Da Silva 2010). Latin America has shifted from a situation of poor educational coverage and quality to one in which coverage is broad, but quality is mediocre, and access is very uneven. Hence, today many commentators argue that the priority focus must be on improving quality. However, providing a quality education requires good quality teachers. As the problems of educational access are being solved, attention must also be concentrated on improving the quality of the teaching profession (Vaillant 2005a).

Many efforts have been devoted to improving teacher performance. Some Latin American countries, including Brazil, Chile, and Colombia, have sought to reform their programmes for teacher training. More systematic preparation of teacher trainers and support for beginning teachers are among the successful strategies they are promoting (Hunt 2008; Vaillant 2010). Though these attempts have been relatively successful, many questions remain unanswered: How can teachers be prepared to foster inclusive education? What types of policies are effective for improving teacher status? What changes must be made to teacher education?

### **The low status of teaching and the reproduction of poor education**

In recent years, Latin American society has made a general critique of its educational systems. The media often present a negative image of educational situations and of teacher performance. This idea that society does not value, and ultimately underestimates, teachers has been the subject of many books (Esteve 2003). Unfortunately, teachers themselves sometimes seem convinced of society's perception of their role. A review of the popular literature illustrates the current situation. Various actors insist that both education and teachers are important, but fail to provide them the consideration and support they need to maintain their morale. The expectations for teachers are high but their value is low (Vaillant 2010).

Several authors have noted that in the early 20th century, teaching in Latin America was considered a privileged, highly prestigious occupation (Braslavsky 2002). But this situation has changed; today teaching is frequently associated with negative experiences such as work overload, fatigue, uncertainty about its function, and new requirements often not covered in pre-service teacher education (Vaillant and Rossel 2006). This transformation is clearly connected to social prestige and value, two concepts that, although difficult to measure, have become part of the teaching profession's research agenda at an international level (OECD 2005).

In public schools, teachers increasingly come from poorer sectors of the population and some have limited basic skills. Teacher salaries are usually low and this fact dissuades some individuals from entering the teaching profession (De Moura Castro and Ioschpe 2008). The salary scale usually gives priority to those with more years of experience. The only way to earn more is to leave the classroom and become a principal or supervisor. Some researchers suggest that increasing the salaries in Latin America could draw higher-quality candidates into the profession and reduce the need for teachers to work double shifts or multiple jobs (Umansky 2005).

The situation is even more difficult in isolated rural areas where the poorest of students are taught in multi-grade settings. It is a common practice in most Latin American countries to post the newest, least qualified (and often completely unqualified) teachers to these inaccessible places, where housing and general living situations are most often

inadequate and teachers have little or no contact with their peers. As soon as they have enough experience, these teachers usually transfer to more desirable schools in more populated areas, thereby insuring a steady stream of the newest, least qualified teachers to serve the students with the highest level of need (Hunt 2008). Schooling is further complicated by the extraordinary diversity of native languages and ethnicities in the region. Estimates of the numbers of indigenous people in Latin America and the Caribbean range from approximately 22–34 million, and their inclusion in educational systems has been a preoccupation of many governments (Vegas and Petrow 2008).

The available documentation suggests that teaching is an occupation with lower prestige than other professions. Research conducted in Brazil in 2009, based on public opinion surveys, showed that teaching is not considered an attractive option for high school students; only 2% of respondents wanted to pursue a degree in education (Gatti et al. 2009). Vaillant and Rossel (2006) compared the situation of the teaching profession in seven Latin American countries and found that the teachers and professors in the region share a “feeling of loss and decline of social prestige in their image” in society (p. 250). This phenomenon seems linked to the decreasing number of talented high school graduates who choose to become teachers, and to the generalized perception in several Latin American societies that the poor quality of education there is the responsibility of teachers and professors (Gatti et al. 2009). The problem of status is a continuous source of low self-esteem and dissatisfaction among teachers. Furthermore, international studies have confirmed that this tendency is not only a problem in Latin America: in many countries teaching carries a low social value compared to other professions (Seltzer and Roper-Nedd 2006).

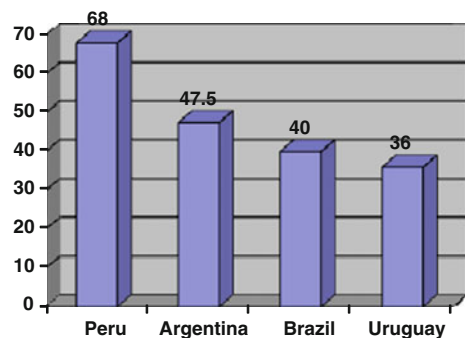
The light shed by empirical studies in this area is striking. For example, Tenti (2005) surveyed teachers in four countries in the region in a 2002–2003 study about teaching conditions and found that almost two thirds do not feel appreciated by society as a whole and are quite willing to abandon the teaching profession. As Fig. 2 shows, 68% of Peruvian teachers wished to leave the profession, along with 47.5% of Argentines, 40% of Brazilians, and 36% of Uruguayans.

A study in Colombia found that teachers emphasized lack of recognition as the feeling that produced most dissatisfaction in their profession (OEI-SM 2008). They mentioned their apparently low value in society more frequently than feelings of isolation, problems of everyday conflict, and personal and professional criticism.

Overall then, the low value of the teaching profession in Latin America is an ongoing problem (Vaillant 2010) and this influences the context and possibilities for policies aimed at strengthening the profession. The lack of recognition perceived by teachers and

**Fig. 2** Percentage of teachers willing to abandon teaching in selected Latin American countries.

Source: Tenti (2005)



professors has an impact on the way they live their professional lives and influences their attitudes about remaining in the profession.

### **Teacher education: An urgent challenge**

Although there is a consensus in Latin America that teacher education is crucially important, current reforms are insufficient because teachers' training is insufficient and they are poorly paid. Most teachers have an educational profile that is significantly weaker than that of their counterparts in developed countries, and not all of them hold a university or third-level degree (PREAL 2001). Latin America needs better qualified teachers with a deep understanding and appreciation of learners' diversities, who act respectfully towards their students, supporting them individually and emphasizing goals like "learning to learn", problem-solving, and analytical skills, as well as developing a sense of responsibility and ability to co-operate (Opertti et al. 2009).

A major challenge today is to analyze the role that teacher education curricula should play in responding to the diversity of learners. Teacher education needs to move from its currently rigid disciplinary and decontextualized content towards a more flexible approach, providing possibilities for diverse rhythms and pathways of learning progression. Many education specialists associate today's outcome-oriented approaches to curricula with inclusive teaching and learning (Moreno 2006), and present them as important tools in the hands of teachers to develop autonomous, critical, and assertive citizens (Opertti and Duncombe 2008). Adopting these approaches is a current challenge in Latin America.

#### Pre-service teacher education

In Latin America, large proportions of primary school teachers, up to one third in some countries, lack the necessary training to adequately fulfill their teaching responsibilities (Da Silva 2010). For example, in Guatemala and Peru, only 64% of primary school teachers are adequately trained for their positions. The typical primary school teacher tends to be female, urban, non-indigenous, and minimally trained (Hunt 2008). The demographic makeup of the teaching force in Latin America poses several challenges to school access and quality education for all children.

Latin America has inherited debts from the twentieth century that must be adequately settled: universal coverage for children of school age, inclusion of vulnerable populations positioned outside the schooling system, and improvement of educational quality. On the other hand, we must accept the fact that education in Latin America must make the leap into the twenty-first century and undertake new tasks that are pivotal for encouraging economic growth, social cohesion, and cultural integration, along with access to new technologies and civic education. Both agendas—the one inherited from the twentieth century and the new one we are facing in the twenty-first—are extremely demanding and require a tremendous effort on various fronts and from various actors. In this endeavor, teachers play a pivotal role in helping children develop the skills they need to succeed in the society of today and tomorrow (Vaillant 2005b).

Pre-service teacher education programmes in Latin America are blamed for poor student learning and unsatisfactory school system performance. The deficiencies most commonly found in Latin America are related to the inadequate methods used to teach teachers. Leu (2005) summarizes the literature by saying that it "makes clear that the robotic approach to teacher development produces neither the teaching skills nor the attitudes required for

improving classroom approaches and student learning". It also "stresses that if teachers are to become reflective practitioners and users of active teaching and learning methods they must participate in professional development programmes that advocate and use these same models" (p. iii). This principle holds true for both pre-service teacher education and for continuing professional development, which has not had a great impact on actual teaching practices. Many programmes offering new teaching practices or classroom activities have not remained effective for very long. Trained teachers often revert quickly to their old habits, and training activities have little effect on their motivation or ability to use the innovations or good practices they were exposed to in training (Vaillant 2005b).

Nevertheless, pre-service and in-service teacher programmes have undergone some changes throughout Latin America and the Caribbean in recent decades. Currently many innovations are being implemented, although few have managed to make much of an impact on actual teaching practices. One of the most important reforms since the 1950s has been the shift of teacher training from secondary institutions to universities or tertiary education institutions; this has enhanced teacher qualifications. With the exception of Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, which continue to rely entirely on "normal schools" (teachers' colleges or teacher-training colleges), the change to universities has become more the norm than the exception in the region (Vaillant 2004).

Although the university has often been criticized as overly theoretical, as content-focused rather than skill-focused, and as being divorced from the reality of the school classroom, especially from schools in isolated and impoverished areas of Latin America, the shift to higher-level educational institutions for future teachers is generally acknowledged to have enhanced the quality of instruction at both the primary and secondary school levels (Ávalos 2006). Pre-service programmes might be improving at some levels; however, underlying problems still create obstacles to improving teacher education. Among them are poor academic preparation among those entering the pre-service institution, lack of true interest in the profession, failure to meet the requirements to be a teacher, and a drop in the number of candidates applying to training institutions (Villegas-Reimers 1998).

In recent decades pre-service teacher education has been the Cinderella of Latin American education. Teachers are relatively neglected but they are still seen as the main hope for change. There are many ways to enhance the professional status of teachers and make teaching careers more attractive, such as setting up a pre-service teacher education system that carries high status. One of the many steps that need to be taken now is to re-invent the traditional model of teacher education. But this re-invention must not turn its back on inclusive education, as it has in the past, or it is doomed to fail.

Inclusive education has remained a major and pending challenge. In general, students have been placed in regular schools without introducing significant institutional and curricular changes in either school culture or teaching practices (Operti et al. 2009). This is what Peters (2004) refers to as the placement paradigm: inclusive education is conceptualized as a place and not as a service delivered. In practice, inclusive education may risk becoming a rhetorical proposal rather than a reality, being more about minor changes in school classrooms than about a change in curricular content and pedagogy relevant to children's learning needs. Latin America urgently needs to provide teachers with the skills they need to face the challenges of inclusive education. These skills must be taught at the level of pre-service teacher education, as opposed to more special education training. Reforms in teacher education are needed to promote inclusive education in the classroom. They are also needed to ensure that new knowledge about inclusive education and learning in inclusive schools is taught to new teachers entering the profession.



### Continuous teacher education

Many studies conducted on education in Latin America stress that teachers generally do not apply what they have learned during their professional development courses (Aguerrondo 2003). This likely happens because course content appears to be too distant from teachers' realities. Professional development does not serve its purpose unless teachers are monitored and given classroom-level technical assistance for months after they complete their training (Ávalos 2006). In practice, teachers tend to teach in the style in which they were taught themselves. In Latin America, this too often has meant a teacher-centered approach that relies on copying and memorization. Understanding students' needs based on formative assessment practices and planning instruction to meet those needs is not yet common practice in Latin America, although a study by McKinsey and Company (2007) found this to be one of the three most important features of high-performing school systems.

In addition, continuing professional development is not well matched to other dimensions of educational policies. Teachers often receive training as a means of advancing in their careers or of satisfying a given legal requirement. Prevailing incentive structures lead teachers to accumulate diplomas or certificates, but not to acquire substantive education. Researchers have found little, if any, connection between the diploma or certificate received and the use of new skills or techniques in the classroom context (Morduchowicz 2003).

### Inclusive education and diversity in Latin America

Currently, 70% of the population of Latin America is urban, mostly living in culturally mixed groups rather than homogeneous blocks. Nonetheless, rural sectors still constitute a significant portion of the total population in many countries in the region, and policy-makers must also consider their specific needs. This increasing diversity and stratification between urban and rural areas introduce multiple and daily tensions. Society owes a debt to people who have been deprived of access to important goods and services. If society is to pay this debt, it will be necessary to understand the essential role that education plays in social, economic, and political processes of inclusion. More inclusive education systems allow for coordinated efforts between state institutions and entities belonging to civil society, and make it easier for all citizens to have access to goods and services (Sorj and Martuccelli 2008).

The term inclusion is interpreted in various ways, but today it is generally associated with a process intended to respond to the diversity among students (Blanco Guijarro 2008) by increasing their participation and reducing their exclusion. UNESCO (2009, p. 8) provides the following definition: "Inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners ... As an overall principle, it should guide all education policies and practices, starting from the fact that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just and equal society". Inclusion can be seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth, and adults by increasing their participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures, and strategies, with a common vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular educational system to educate all children (UNESCO 2009).

Learner diversity is a key concept that must be considered in any policy for inclusive education. Diversity is a multi-faceted concept that can contain many elements and levels of distinction, including age, ethnicity, class, gender, physical abilities, race, sexual orientation, religious status, educational background, geographical location, income, marital status, parental status and work experiences. The OECD (2010, p. 21) defines diversity as “characteristics that can affect the specific ways in which developmental potential and learning are realized, including cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious and socio-economic differences”.

Today, educational inclusion as a response to learner diversity calls for a different kind of school, one that is open not only in terms of space but also in its educational plans and in the organization of its curricula (Terigi et al. 2009). Thus it is clear that teachers in Latin America will need more knowledge to face the challenges posed by children and young people from vulnerable elements of the population. This makes it necessary to design and implement support processes of various kinds. Children and young people need the support of their family and their most immediate environment, and this is where the school setting appears as especially important. Another key element to consider in developing policies is the psychological, social, and affective processes that make inclusive education a reality. In addition to knowledge, all children and young people should be given the opportunity to develop competencies that aim to improve their self-esteem, and help them maintain social relationships and comply with rules. In this regard, it is impossible to overemphasize the important role that teachers play. The literature clearly shows the strategic role they play in inclusive education, as they are privileged actors for facilitating the re-entrance into school of excluded children and young people from vulnerable environments. They are vital actors in the education system (Ainscow et al. 2006). In Latin America today, the problem is that the teachers who are recruited do not always have skills that are adequate for this challenge.

Recently, three studies carried out in Colombia (Calvo et al. 2009), Mexico (Loyo and Calvo 2009) and Uruguay (Mancebo and Monteiro 2009) focused on inclusive education and educational re-entry programmes targeted at basic education students. These researchers found that, except for some information-sharing meetings, no special workshops or training sessions had been devoted to the issue of inclusion. In fact, even qualified teachers were not prepared to teach in poor school environments and had no experience of doing so during their pre-service teacher education. In addition, few attempts had been made to define the desirable educational background and experience for teachers and professors involved in inclusive education. Moreover, no teacher support and monitoring methods are available for inclusive education. It is not enough to have the necessary teachers and professors; also required is a support and follow-up system that guarantees ongoing feedback on teaching.

The conditions on accessing teaching positions in inclusive education are an additional difficulty. Existing regulations restrict the recruitment of teachers needed to teach in vulnerable environments. In some cases, principals and technical staff are in charge of recruitment; in other cases, the process relies on public announcements. In either situation, however, experience shows that many vacancies are left unfilled.

Another problem that governments encounter is retaining and rotating teachers who work with vulnerable students. Research on this topic identifies teacher retention as one of the core difficulties in schools with vulnerable populations (Loyo and Calvo 2009). However, some studies in Latin America have found that teachers who work with vulnerable students in poor schools feel less isolated when they have the support of other

professionals (social workers, psychologists, etc.); the result is significantly better student outcomes (Mancebo and Monteiro 2009; Terigi et al. 2009).

### Learning from good practices

Education practitioners and policy makers in Latin America have tried to confront the challenge of inclusive education by targeting one of the most pivotal links in the inclusion chain: teachers and their qualifications. It is never easy to change the status quo when it has become ossified, ingrained in the social fabric, as is the case in Latin America where teachers are stigmatized and traditional conceptions of education prevail. As I show in this section, however, valuable attempts have been made in the region to redress the problems associated with teacher qualification and status. Two of these are teacher awards and innovative teacher education policies.

#### The role of teacher awards

As described earlier, a growing line of research suggests that the teaching profession is poorly valued in comparison with other professions in Latin America and that teachers feel their social prestige and social image declining (Da Silva 2010; Vaillant and Rossel 2006). As a result, fewer talented high school graduates choose teaching as a profession, Latin Americans generally hold teachers responsible for the poor quality of education, and teachers experience low self-esteem and dissatisfaction, leading them to consider leaving the profession (Tenti 2005).

In recent years, various Latin American countries have worked to improve the image of the teacher, by rewarding the most effective educators and by identifying and promoting successful teaching practices, especially in inclusive education (see Table 1). These initiatives have varied greatly. In some countries (Mexico and Peru), the awards are open only to teachers who work in the public sector, while in others (Brazil, Colombia, and Guatemala), they include teachers from both the public and private sectors. In addition, some initiatives include only basic education teachers, while others include secondary teachers. All the initiatives require the teacher to be implementing a project or an innovative education strategy, and some require that this methodology be implemented for a specific period of time (Vaillant and Rossel 2010).

Although these initiatives are much more recent than in developed countries, several examples are worth noting. The *Educador Nota 10 Award* (<http://revistaescuela.abril.com.br/premiovc/>) is an initiative by the Víctor Civita Foundation that seeks to honor the work of

**Table 1** Teacher awards in Latin America

Country	Award	Awarding institution
Brazil	<i>Educador Nota 10</i> <i>Gestor Nota 10</i>	Victor Civita foundation
Colombia	<i>Premio Compartir al Maestro</i>	Fundación compartir
Guatemala	<i>Maestros 100 puntos</i>	Grupo empresarios por la educación
Mexico	<i>Premio ABC</i>	Mexicanos primero
Peru	<i>El Maestro que deja huella</i>	Fundacion inter-bank

Source: Data gathered by author

teachers all over Brazil, who develop innovative projects in their schools. The award also includes a category to honor school principals and administrators (*Gestor Nota 10*), which is aimed at educational coordinators and heads of studies in public and private institutions and community schools all over Brazil.

In Colombia, the *Compartir al Maestro* award (<http://www.premiocompartirmaestro.org/>) aims to reward outstanding teachers, promote more just social values in the teaching profession, and support and endorse the professionalization of teaching. In Guatemala, the *Maestro 100 Puntos* award (<http://www.maestro100puntos.org.gt/maestro/>) was launched in 2006 as an initiative by the *Grupo Empresarios por la Educación*. The program aims to identify the best classroom activities and pioneering projects so that teachers all over the country may replicate them. The award has the support of universities, companies, private foundations, and international agencies.

Finally, significant initiatives are also taking place in Peru and Mexico. *Maestro que deja huella* (<http://www.maestroquedejahuella.com.pe/>), an initiative by the Interbank of Peru, was launched in 2007. Its goal is to identify, highlight, and promote the work of teachers who make a difference for their students by innovating and showing a special dedication and commitment to teaching. Promoted in Mexico by the organization Mexicanos Primero (<http://www.mexicanosprimero.org/>), the ABC Award honors teachers who make a difference in their professional work, who show the will to keep educating themselves, and who have a positive impact on their students' learning and in their communities.

Overall, the low value that the teaching profession receives in Latin America is an ongoing problem (Vaillant 2010). One way to reverse what is seen as an increasing lack of teacher motivation has been to introduce awards that recognize and honor effective teaching. The role such awards can play in improving the status of teachers reaches its greatest significance in the context of inclusive education. Though the evidence of its effects is still incipient and limited, the awards emerge as an interesting and complementary tool to educational policies that seek to improve recruitment, retention and, ultimately, the effectiveness of teachers for inclusive education.

### Innovations in teacher education

As I have argued above, the teacher must be considered a vital partner in the development and success of inclusive education. Today, new trends in professional development for teachers are flourishing; these are summarized in Table 2. The programmes are based on the concept of developing a systematic approach to training, and grounded in the realities of the school as a whole.

**Table 2** Inclusive education: new trends in professional development for teachers

Country	Programme	Innovation
Brazil	Accelerated learning	Networking activities
Colombia	<i>Escuela Nueva</i>	Case study discussion groups
Costa Rica	Educational technology	Technology in teacher training
Peru	Teacher training (PLANCAD)	Shared experiences
Venezuela	<i>Fe y Alegría</i>	Classroom-based approaches

Source: Data gathered by author

Classroom-based programmes represent one successful model being implemented in Latin America. The correlation is direct: the sooner student teachers come into contact with real-life situations associated with professional practice, and the longer they maintain this contact, the more effective their teaching will be. *Fe y Alegría* in Venezuela (<http://www.feyalegria.org/?idSeccion=43>) provides a good example of the benefits of classroom-based approaches in teacher education (Arnové 2007). Founded in Caracas in 1955, it now operates in 17 countries, serving more than a million people. Its mission is to transform society through quality education for the poorest. Schools are perceived and utilized as learning environments, broadly defined, where teachers learn by doing, and through examples provided by peers or experienced teachers and supervisors.

With the use of distance education, in-service teachers can now benefit from the communication innovations developed to train teachers for inclusive education. The Educational Technology Program in Costa Rica (<http://www.fod.ac.cr/>) is a collaborative effort between the Omar Dengo Foundation and the Ministry of Education. First implemented in 1987, it provides a good example of such uses of technology in teacher training. Conceived within a constructivist framework, the computer-based programme provides in-service training (Navarro and Verdisco 2000). Computers are used as tools to structure and link intellectual tasks, technical competencies, and pedagogical skills. Training is provided through modules and adapted to the needs and abilities of the given target group; content difficulty and the intensity of technology increase progressively. Each training module integrates a variety of platforms and media. Information technology allows for constant communication among teachers and between teachers and facilitators. Facilitation and monitoring are usually delivered electronically.

Some strategies are structured as teacher-to-teacher networks. They provide “critical friends” to examine and reflect on teaching, and opportunities to share experiences associated with efforts to develop new practices. In the Accelerated Learning Program in Brazil (<http://www.inep.gov.br/>) and the Teacher Training Program (PLANCAD) in Peru (<http://www.minedu.gob.pe/>), teachers participate in a range of networking activities, including follow-up meetings, e-mail or regular mail exchanges, and peer-directed meetings (Navarro and Verdisco 2000). Accelerated Learning was implemented to reduce age-grade distortion and free up space in public schools. Under this program, the federal government finances the creation of special classes for over-aged students. PLANCAD, under the Ministry of Education, was established to improve the quality of teacher work. It began in 1995 and hires universities, upper-level educational institutes, and other educational organizations to train teachers from public schools through contracts with the ministry.

The *Escuela Nueva Project* in Colombia uses similar, interesting approaches to professional development. Started as a special project for rural, one-room schools, it provides child-centered, community-based education led by teachers who facilitate active, participatory, and cooperative learning. In the original programme, teachers met in groups to discuss case studies exemplifying certain common problems and desired teaching practices, and were provided with self-paced teaching materials for the students. When new teachers entered the project, they were released from class to observe an *Escuela Nueva* classroom in action. They would then return to their own classrooms and try out the new approach. The experienced teacher who had been visited might then be released to come and assist a new teacher and discuss questions or problem areas. Cost-effective and highly adaptable, *Escuela Nueva* now serves millions of children around the world, and the basic idea is being used in many other countries, including Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Peru (Hunt 2008).

## Final thoughts

What can be done to develop schools and programmes that can really reach out to children and young people from vulnerable sectors? Poor schools, where children tend to perform less well academically, require additional supports to increase education quality and adequately recruit and retain students who find it difficult to finish their education. In some cases supplementary efforts will be needed to improve education quality, connecting programmes to all the available supports provided by ministries of education, other state services, and the civil society. We must move away from a situation in which teachers feel frustrated and have no motivation to make improvements. We must find ways to re-endow the teaching career with the social status it deserves.

One possible way to improve teacher status is to design better pre-service and in-service education. This analysis of teacher education in Latin America, at a time of great social changes, shed light on the great complexity of the problems and the need to respond with systematic strategies of action and not partial policies. The global and systemic characteristics to which teacher education in Latin America must adapt go hand in hand with a series of challenges which will appear in the decades to come.

- Teacher recruitment: attract the most competent students to the teaching profession.
- Pre-service education: improve the link between initial training and the requirements for professional development.
- Continuing education: provide permanent support and training to teachers.
- Professionalism: promote it as a strategy to improve the situation and working conditions of teachers.
- Regional and international cooperation: use it as an instrument to promote teacher mobility and competence.
- Alliances between private and public actors: create them in a quest for better education for all.

The great challenge for Latin American countries is to learn to deal with the complexity of teacher education in the future. A range of strategies to support teachers to develop inclusive practices is essential. Teachers need opportunities to establish and create networks with other teachers and professionals like themselves. Furthermore, teachers need training and skills to work with children and young people living in difficult circumstances as well as incentives to encourage teachers to work in remote or difficult geographical areas. Teachers play a key role in providing education that is inclusive for all. Without the efforts of those who stand in front of the classroom, inclusive education remains rhetoric, rather than the reality for those who desperately need it.

There is now a strong concern in Latin America to improve the quality of teacher training for inclusive education. The ministries of education and teachers' associations show a growing interest in defining frameworks for good teaching. Much remains to be done, but it seems that the training of teachers for more inclusive education has gradually been incorporated into the educational policy agenda in Latin America.

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