

# Teacher education at a crossroads: the imperatives for reform

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Teaching has always been an uncertain profession. In *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë's heroine, Lucy Snowe, anguishes over revealing to her future parents that she is a teacher. A protagonist in Chimamanda Ngozi Adiché's *The Thing Around Your Neck* despairs of becoming 'a dull teacher in Arusha'. Teachers, as any reader of Dickens will know, do not always get good press. Other professions, law and medicine, do not suffer in the same way.

## The plight of teachers

Across the world, teachers are under pressure. There are not enough of them; those that are there do not have the right qualifications and many take the earliest opportunity to leave teaching for another job. These are global concerns. In the USA, around half of all high school subjects are taught by non-specialists (in Mathematics and Science, the figures are even higher). California has introduced special, school-based, credentialing programmes for unqualified elementary school teachers. In low income countries, the problems are more acute. In Sub-Saharan Africa, very large numbers of primary school teachers are unqualified or underqualified. And among the technically qualified, classroom skills and expertise can be poor. In some parts of Africa and Asia, teacher absentee rates hover around 25 per cent. CCT cameras have even been used in some places to keep teachers in schools! Successive Global Monitoring Reports from UNESCO, particularly since the 2005 report on quality, have documented these difficulties. To give just two examples from many:

*'In many countries, present styles and methods of teaching are not serving teachers well.'* (GMR, 2005, p. 230)

*'At the primary level in particular, teacher training is often fragmented and incomplete – in some cases non-existent.'* (GMR, 2009, p. 119)

The global monitoring reports also point to research into the link between teacher quality and the educational attainment of pupils. An important series of studies is beginning to appear around this theme. It is of interest that the relationship between teacher quality and educational outcomes is being explored by organisations without a direct education remit. The Centre for the Study of African Economies at the University of Oxford, for example, has published work by Monazza Aslam and Geeta Kingdon on the most effective ways that teachers in Pakistan can raise attainment. They found that:

*'...the usually un-measured teaching "process" variables impact student achievement strongly – lesson planning, involving students by asking questions during class and quizzing them on past material all substantially benefit pupil learning.'* (*The Centre for the Study of African Economies Working Paper Series. Paper 273, p. 23*)

## Forcing change

The implications of these findings for teacher education and training are clear. As the global monitoring reports suggest, teacher training must be more practice focused. There is concern about the relevance of much pre-service training, and provision for continuing professional development either does not exist or is just token across many countries. Yet the need is huge. Ten million more teachers are needed in the basic education sectors of low income countries over the next few years. Of these, 4 million will be in addition to existing numbers. In-service provision, where the numbers are much higher, is additional to this.

From the analysis one thing is clear – there is absolutely no way the 'bricks and mortar' institutions of teacher training created in the last century will be adequate for 21st-century needs. In making that assertion, let me be very clear on one point. I am not suggesting there is no place for campus institutions. I am merely making the mathematical observation that the training needs of new and existing teachers far outstrip the capacity of existing institutions.

It follows, therefore, that new models of training will be needed, and for teachers, this means that their upgrading and continuing professional development must be met by school-based programmes. It also means that a radical shift in policy is required to embrace a significantly more diversified framework for education and training.

Yet this policy shift is so slow in coming. In country after country, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, the vast majority of resources are going to campus, residential training programmes extending for up to three or four years, while unqualified teachers flood into the classrooms and existing teachers have little or no opportunities for professional development. Numerous reports from international agencies have commented critically on this imbalance.

The logic of this situation points to the systematic development of school-based programmes using a variety of education and training methodologies. And this we are beginning to see. CalState's Teach in California, a school-based distance learning programme, is a response to the crisis in elementary schools. The UK Open University's flexible postgraduate teacher training programme offers opportunities for mature entrant mathematicians, scientists and modern linguists to train as teachers. UNESCO and the World Bank are also recognising the need. The latter has recently published a handbook for the myriad new course developers.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these initiatives, more needs to be done. I suggest the following six key strategies.



- (i) Fully integrate school-based distance approaches into national training policies: not 'bolt-on projects' but fully integrated strategic thinking.
- (ii) Establish a new, practical, classroom-focused curriculum for upgrading courses, and for continuing professional development.
- (iii) Adapt more formative portfolio assessment systems giving primacy to classroom practice: the dead hand of timed examinations still weighs heavily on many programmes.
- (iv) Model costs in programme design in advance of implementation: problems of sustainability almost always arise when this is not done.
- (v) Plan for the progressive adaptation of information and communication technology (ICT), especially mobile technologies: too many programmes continue to ignore the potential of this.
- (vi) Use media, especially radio, to make training more interesting and stimulating: too much teacher education, quite frankly, is plain boring.

How can these strategies be achieved? One first step is to make sure that those making policy around teachers are fully aware of the new ideas and the new ways of thinking. UNESCO's Teacher Training in Sub-Saharan Africa (TTISA) initiative is seeking to do just this through a review process involving an increasing number of

countries. As important, however, are the more grass roots initiatives, where teacher educators and the institutions in which they work cooperate more widely to establish a foundation for change. One of the most large-scale examples is the TESSA programme, initiated in 2005.

## TESSA

The principal purpose of the Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) research and development consortium is to improve the quality of, and extend access to, university-led primary school teacher education in Sub-Saharan Africa.

### TESSA's primary objectives

- To create a consortium of African universities, working with the Open University and other international organisations, to directly address the education and training needs of teachers in the region. TESSA is the largest teacher education co-operative venture in the region.
- To bring together the best African expertise to design and improve teacher training.
- To design and build a multilingual Open Educational Resource (OER) bank, modular and flexible in format, that will be freely available to all teacher educators in the region.

### TESSA's range of activities

- Creating TESSA study units through a framework and format that allows easy adaptation to local context.
- Structuring the TESSA study units and other materials in ways that facilitate work or school-based training that is practically relevant to improved classroom teaching.
- Maximising the potential of ICTs in pursuing TESSA's principal aims within existing structures.
- Developing cooperative research activities relevant to TESSA's purposes.
- Extending the consortium activity through the widening involvement of university institutions from other African countries.
- Establishing African executive leadership structures for the ongoing development of the TESSA network.

The TESSA consortium is now well established, comprising 18 universities and related organisations across nine African countries. The consortium meets regularly and has multiple sources of funding income. More than 100 African academics have participated and are participating in the TESSA process, including authoring the TESSA study units. A full first phase of resource development has been completed and 75 original core study units authored by African academics are now available for use.<sup>2</sup> Media resources have also been developed, available from iTunes U (an education-focused part of the iTunes Store) as well as from the TESSA website. The TESSA text resources have all been adapted and versioned to the nine country contexts of participating universities, and are available in Arabic, English, French and Kiswahili. All the TESSA study units contain a series of activities that participating teachers can carry out in their classrooms, with guidance given to teacher educators to help integrate and make effective use of the study units in their courses.

An extended web development process has created an environment that can be used across the range of African societies and localities. All nine participating countries and institutions have their own web presence within the overall TESSA online environment, and provision has been made for all resources to be used in specially designed pdf downloadable formats for easy printing.

### TESSA initiatives

TESSA has commissioned a number of research activities, most notably a project looking at the lives of female teachers in rural communities in five of the participating institutions in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Sudan.<sup>3</sup> A range of further initiatives have also been developed: funding has been received from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to work collaboratively with OER Africa; The Waterloo Foundation is funding an extension of the TESSA resources into the education of secondary science teachers; and a TESSA programme to help educate and train potential women teachers in rural areas of Malawi has been funded by the Scottish Government.

### Facing up to the challenge

The scale of the challenge facing teacher education is huge. Teacher education across the globe is facing critical scrutiny and the issue of teacher education is not just a developing world problem. But the need to think of new structures, new curriculum and new ways of engaging teachers is most acute where the 'teacher resource' may be the only one available. Existing arrangements must be reformed.

Programmes such as TTISA and TESSA are charting the way. But much more still remains to be done.

### End notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see <http://tinyurl.com/ODLforTeacherEdAfrica>

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see [www.tessafrica.net](http://www.tessafrica.net)

<sup>3</sup> A report on this work, by the TESSA research assistant, Alison Buckler, can be found in the International Journal of Educational Development: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2010.04.003>

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