

Purpose, pressures, and possibilities

Conversations about teacher professional norms in the Global South

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—Yue-Yi Hwa

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RISE

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Foreword

Lant Pritchett

Lant Pritchett is the RISE Research Director at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford. Previously, he was a Senior Fellow at the Center for Global Development and Professor of the Practice of International Development at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. In 2017 he published two co-authored books through Oxford University Press: *Building State Capability* and *Deals & Development: The Political Dynamics of Growth Episodes*. He also published two solely authored books with the Center for Global Development, *Let Their People Come* (2006) and *The Rebirth of Education* (2013), and over a hundred articles and papers (with more than 25 co-authors) on a wide range of topics.



This volume on teacher norms in the developing world is an important contribution on one of the world’s biggest and more difficult challenges.

The challenge is the learning crisis in the developing world. The “learning crisis” refers to the fact that nearly all children now attend at least some school—and yet, by a recent estimate, 94 percent of children in Sub-Saharan Africa, 89 percent of kids in South Asia, and two-thirds of all children globally do not acquire a modest standard of “foundational skills”. The authors estimate the total cumulative value of the gains from reaching universal foundational skills would be \$700 trillion USD (current world GDP is only 96 trillion).

The only path to universal foundational skills is for children in low-performing education systems (which currently encompass, tragically, education systems in most of the developing world) to learn more per year of schooling—much, much more. Fortunately, there are high-performing education systems in the developing world that show these much higher levels of learning are possible. Data that tracks whether students have achieved mastery of “foundational numeracy” shows that 75 percent of children in Vietnam reach that level by Grade 4, compared to only 24 percent in Bangladesh, only 14 percent in Ghana, and only 9 percent in Pakistan.

And these low levels of early grade learning persist into higher grades. Whereas 81 percent of enrolled 15-year-olds in Vietnam reach the SDG level of “minimum learning” in mathematics of PISA level 2 or above, only 10 percent do in Cambodia, and only 2.3 percent do in Zambia.

Gust, S., Hanushek, E. A., & Woessmann, L. (2022). Global Universal Basic Skills: Current Deficits and Implications for World Development. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/114. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISEWP_2022/114.

See <https://www.education-progress.org/en/articles/trajectories>.

Pritchett, L., & Viarengo, M. (2021). Learning Outcomes in Developing Countries: Four Hard Lessons from PISA-D. RISE Working Paper Series. 21/069. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2021/069.

So why is it that a resource-poor country like Vietnam can produce learning and high levels of mastery of cognitive skills among its youth, and other countries at similar levels of development resources cannot?

As I am not an educationist but first and foremost a development practitioner, let me wander a bit away from that question and even from education and then circle back to how teacher norms are an important part of the answer to that question.

And even further afield, let me start with a recent US science fiction movie, *Stowaway*. In that movie, some astronauts are on a spaceship travelling to Mars. The spaceship consists of two big modules that are connected by a very long tether. These two heavy halves spin rapidly around a centre point so that the centrifugal force creates an artificial gravity, pulling the contents of each half toward its floor.

The reason I bring this movie up is that it is a powerful example of the complex concept of “multiple stable equilibrium.” Suppose we call the two halves of the spaceship “red” and “green.” If astronauts in both halves of the ship dropped an object, everyone would find that the objects fell to the floor. But the objects would actually be “falling” in polar opposite directions. From the point of view of an astronaut in the “green” half, a dropped object in the “red” half would be falling up, not down.

The implication was that “falling to the floor”—and away from the “green” half of the spaceship—was a locally stable outcome. If (and this was a key plot point for the movie) an astronaut in the red half started climbing along the tether and slipped less than halfway through the trip, they would fall back to the floor of the red half. But, once the astronaut made it more than halfway, the dynamics of force would shift and, unless they resisted the forces, they would “fall” away from the red floor and towards the green floor.

Let me move from science fiction to health care in Rajasthan, and in particular to the behaviour of one kind of health care worker, the “auxiliary nurse midwife” (ANM) who has responsibilities for helping pregnant women with pre-natal care. Three brilliant economists (Banerjee, Deaton, and Duflo, all of whom now have a Nobel Prize in economics) worked together with a local NGO to examine health care and why health outcomes were so poor in Rajasthan. A major factor they identified was that these ANMs were very frequently absent from work, and that, moreover, this pattern of absence was widespread among ANMs.

Two of them (Banerjee and Duflo) then worked with the local NGO, Seva Mandir, and the local government to design a new policy in order to increase attendance of the ANMs, with the goal of better services that would in turn improve healthy birth outcomes. As you might expect from a new policy designed by economists, it involved incentives: the proposed policy was that a number of new ANMs would be hired so that the local sub-centre facilities had two ANMs each, and that the newly hired ANMs would get their full salary only if their absence rate was less than 50 percent

Banerjee, A., Deaton, A., & Duflo, E. (2004). Wealth, Health, and Health Services in Rural Rajasthan. *American Economic Review*, 94(2), 326–330. <https://doi.org/10.1257/0002828041301902>.

(and it is revealing that this was the goal attendance rate). But this wasn't designed by economists alone; the NGO with long experience in the field contributed and the design also included: (i) the use of better technology to record attendance (machine time clocks, not paper records), (ii) since the ANMs often had out of sub-centre responsibilities, clarification from the Ministry that one day a week was designated as "clinic day" and the ANMs should always be present that day, and (iii) the engagement of local NGOs to "ground-truth" the machine clock stamped attendance records (so, for instance, two ANMs could not collude for one to clock the other in as present).

Since the economists were interested in knowing the causal impact of this new policy, there was a research effort that tracked a wide variety of outputs and outcomes. The study was implemented as a "randomised controlled trial" (RCT) and clinics were either in the "treatment" group, subject to the new policy, or "control" group that proceeded with business as usual.

Now, it might seem that this was like testing gravity: of course if half of their salary is at risk this will create a powerful incentive for the ANMs to show up. In fact, one of the researchers, Esther Duflo, had already done an earlier experiment in the same state of India, Rajasthan, with the same NGO, Seva Mandir, that showed that, in the schools run by the NGO in rural areas of the state, a new policy of requiring teachers to take a date-time stamped picture of themselves at the beginning and end of each school day had increased teacher attendance and thereby significantly increased student learning. The title of the paper reporting on the results was: "Incentives work".

When it came to the new nurse midwife policy, the officially recorded absence of ANMs fell significantly in the treatment clinics that had "high-powered" incentives for attendance, and hence most of the ANMs received their full pay. But, fortunately, the study did not just rely on the official data. It actually measured the physical presence of the ANMs at the clinic on the designated clinic day—and *presence* also fell significantly, such that after a year of implementation of the new policy the actual presence of the ANMs was much lower than it had been before the policy. How could it be that both absence and presence fell? Well, there was a third category called "exempt" whereby an ANM could have an official document from an authority in the Ministry stating that, on that day, they were not physically present but that this would not be recorded as an official "absence" that would count against their absence tally for wage purposes.

The title of the researchers' paper detailing the findings reflects what they learned from that experiment: "Putting a Band-Aid on a Corpse". That is, they did not give up on the notion that "incentives work"—the incentives *did* work. But the incentives didn't work to create attendance; rather, the incentives worked to induce the ANMs working inside the public sector health care system to pay the official(s) responsible for declaring them "exempt" from duty so that they would not be penalised for not being present. The incentives worked to increase the fraction of all ANM days recorded as "exempt", which ballooned from only about 10 percent before incentives to over 50 percent of all ANM days.

Duflo, E., Hanna, R., & Ryan, S. P. (2012). Incentives Work: Getting Teachers to Come to School. *American Economic Review*, 102(4), 1241–1278. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.102.4.1241>.

Banerjee, A. V., Duflo, E., & Glennerster, R. (2008). Putting a Band-Aid on a Corpse: Incentives for Nurses in the Indian Public Health Care System. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 6(2–3), 487–500. <https://doi.org/10.1162/JEEA.2008.6.2-3.487>.

From science fiction and experiments about attendance of ANMs, let's start to circle back to teacher norms with another RCT experiment, this time about education.

In the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, the government was implementing a new initiative to improve learning in the state, which was to introduce “school improvement plans” in which each school would assess its own conditions and challenges and then formulate a school-specific plan to address those challenges. The idea was that rather than being dictated “top-down”, the improvement plan would work “bottom-up” and the school supervision process would be reoriented to help the schools implement their plan. Again, the government agreed with researchers to implement this in a randomised way so that some districts of the state were “treatment” districts while others delayed the implementation so that they could be compared as “control” (business as usual) districts.

The RCT (Muralidharan and Singh, 2020) revealed three very interesting things.

One, the study showed that schools in the SIP areas actually did produce school improvement plans and that these school improvement plans were different across schools and appeared to accurately reflect the observed differences across schools. So, if there had not been a study tracking not just the SIP “outputs” of the production of plans but also actual “outcomes” of changed behaviour, it would have been easy to declare the SIP initiative a success.

Two, and but, the study also showed that besides completing the SIP, nothing else happened. Student learning in the “treatment” SIP schools was no higher than in the “control” schools. And this lack of learning impact was not a “surprise” as nothing else measurable changed in the SIP schools—not teacher attendance, not supervision visits, not teacher practices, nothing. The authors conclude: “Our results illustrate how ostensibly well-designed programmes, that appear effective based on administrative measures of compliance, may be ineffective in practice.”

Three, a side effect of doing an experimental study to measure, among other things, learning outcomes, was that the study implemented essentially the same assessment of student learning that was done as part of routine school administration, but well invigilated. This showed that the administrative data vastly over-represented what students actually knew, as the administrative data showed 64 percent correct responses for math, whereas the re-test that worked to prevent cheating, collusion, and manipulation of results found only 25.1 percent correct responses on the same questions. If one believed the administrative data, one would be completely misled about learning performance, thinking that students could answer about two thirds of questions correctly rather than knowing the catastrophic fact that only one quarter of questions were answered correctly. But, on a deeper level, this also reveals that those responsible for the assessment and its reporting were engaged in a massive deception, year after year.

Contrast that with another study from RISE that used videos of teachers to examine pedagogical practices of the more and less effective teachers in Vietnam. The study

Muralidharan, K., & Singh, A. (2020). Improving Public Sector Management at Scale? Experimental Evidence on School Governance in India. RISE Working Paper Series. 20/056. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2020/056.

Singh, A. (2020). Myths of Official Measurement: Auditing and Improving Administrative Data in Developing Countries. RISE Working Paper Series. 20/042. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2020/042.

found that high-performing teachers in Vietnam were able to help students acquire metacognitive skills, learning about their own learning, by implementing in practice “five features of the learning environment that foster effective metacognitive learning include (a) engaging curriculum, (b) explicit instruction and modelling, (c) verbalizing, (d) assessment integration, and (e) consistent practice.” An almost equally striking finding is that these video observations of the classrooms that were identified as “low-performing” found teachers engaged in more or less adequate, but not excellent, teaching.

Which brings us back to teacher norms. March and Olsen (2008) summarise their approach to a “logic of appropriateness”:

The simple behavioral proposition is that, most of the time humans take reasoned action by trying to answer three elementary questions: What kind of situation is this? What kind of person am I? and What does a person such as I do in a situation like this? (p. 690)

In some (many?) education systems, the situation is such that practices like buying exemption-from-duty certificates or misrepresenting reported test scores are the routine, and hence are statistically “normal” practice. If one also assumes that most people do not regard themselves as the kind of person who consistently engages in “norm deviant” behaviour, then we have to acknowledge that many (most?) teachers in the situation of assessing student learning in Madhya Pradesh would reason that what is appropriate for people like them in situations like this would be conforming with the norm of “gaming” the assessment in various ways to improve the reported results. In contrast, the statistical norm for teachers in Vietnam is good teaching, and truly excellent teaching is common enough to be an aspirational norm.

This means that we have to expect that the expected impact of any particular policy or programme or “intervention” or education reform effort is going to be conditioned on whether we are in the “red” world or “green” world with respect to teacher norms. That is, to perhaps strain the metaphor, the “gravitational attraction” created by existing teacher norms may cause objects to fall in exactly opposite directions in different education systems.

And now circling back to the opening motivating fact that recently (but pre-COVID) two thirds of children completing their basic schooling do not acquire basic skills, we need to ask whether a mere “business as usual” or even “more of the same” continuation of the policy and programmatic efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning is likely to work. On this, a very recent study by Le Nestour, Moscoviz, and Sandefur (2022) needs to give us pause. They use the DHS and MICS data across a large number of developing countries to track the long-term trend in a descriptive fact: “What is the likelihood an adult woman born in a given year who completed exactly 5 years of schooling can read a simple sentence (in any language of her choosing)?” (And I emphasise this is a descriptive fact and I am not super-imposing any casual interpretation of this fact, like that this fact represents “school quality”, but it is a fact

DeJaeghere, J., Duong, B.-H., & Dao, V. (2021). Teaching Practices That Support Thinking and Promote Learning: Qualitative Evidence from High and Low Performing Classes in Vietnam. 2021/024. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-RI_2021/024.

March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. (2008). Logic of Appropriateness. In R. E. Goodin, M. Moran, & M. Rein (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy* (pp. 689–708). Oxford University Press.

Le Nestour, A., Moscoviz, L., & Sandefur, J. (2022). The Long-Run Decline of Education Quality in the Developing World (Working Paper No. 608). Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/long-run-decline-education-quality-developing-world>.

in the sense that is the result of a clearly defined measurement). They find that in Sub-Saharan Africa this fell from 71.2 percent for women born in the 1950s to only 43.6 percent for women born in the 1990s (the most recent available). In contrast, in East Asia and Pacific this rose from 86.5 percent for women born in the 1950s to 89.1 percent for women born in the 1990s.

Comparing two particular countries for which we also have recent PISA results, Zambia and Vietnam, we see strikingly different trends. The percent of women who could read a sentence having completed exactly Grade 5 rose from 72 percent to 94.1 percent from the first to last available date in Vietnam. In contrast, this fell from 61.2 percent to 22.6 percent in Zambia. This means that most of the massive 71.5 percentage point difference in the most recent cohorts (94.1-22.6) is the result of a gap of only 10.8 percent growing over time due to the very different dynamics.

This is ominous as it means that nothing that has happened in Zambia over the last 50 years: none of the education reforms, none of the education projects, none of the innovations, none of the changes in teacher training, none of the global technological progress has prevented a continued deterioration in this measure of learning. (And the simplistic dismissal of the deterioration of this learning measure as a “natural” or “inevitable” consequence of the expansion of a system towards universal enrolment is belied by the fact that the fraction of women with Grade 5 or higher complete expanded by very similar amounts in East Asia and SSA—34.5 percentage points in East Asia versus 39.5 in SSA—and the trends in enrolment expansion and the measure of learning are completely uncorrelated across countries).

As one wag’s definition of “crazy” is doing the same thing again and again and expecting different results, expecting that a long-term trend of stagnation or deterioration in learning outcomes is going to turn around just as a result of more of the same types of education reforms, policies, programmes, and projects is, well, not a good bet.

The role of the foreword is not to summarise or synthesise or say in other words what this volume says. Rather, its modest role is to prod the reader forward to read the book. So: read this book, as the future of humanity depends on accelerating learning progress in the developing world and that in turn almost certainly will require a massive shift in teacher norms. This book from introduction to the body of interviews to the synthesis essays is a great place to start the thinking about how that might just happen.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The struggle to profess purpose amid competing pressures from selves, situations, standards, and society

Yue-Yi Hwa

Yue-Yi Hwa is the research manager for the RISE Programme at Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government. Her research projects for RISE include a book-length primer (co-authored with Lant Pritchett) on teacher careers in developing countries. She received her PhD in education from the University of Cambridge, where her thesis examined the relationship between teacher accountability and sociocultural context, using data from PISA, TIMSS, and the World Values Survey alongside interviews with teachers in Finland and Singapore. Previously, Yue-Yi taught secondary school English through Teach For Malaysia and was a research fellow for the Penang Institute in Kuala Lumpur.



I remember a day in 2015 when I almost cried in the staffroom. I was in my second year of teaching English at a Malaysian government secondary school in a small town about 90 minutes away from Kuala Lumpur. It was my busiest day of the week, when I had back-to-back double-period lessons with both the Form 4 and Form 5 vocational classes—comprising boys who had scored at the bottom of the exam score distribution in our coeducational school, and who had been so thoroughly failed by the education system (there were two non-literate 16-year-olds in the Form 4 class) that they had little to gain from paying attention in class besides the possibility of avoiding corporal punishment or a tongue-lashing.

Neither of those techniques was a part of my often-ineffectual classroom management repertoire, so I was walking to my desk in the staffroom while trying to decide whether I would feel more mentally prepared for the back-to-back lessons if I spent the preceding free period doing admin, marking homework, planning lessons, or preparing questions for the upcoming round of school-level tests. That was when I saw a note on my desk instructing me to be in a particular classroom immediately—in fact, I was already late—to cover for a teacher who had been called away to other duties (likely to chaperone students to an interschool competition or to attend a district-level training session on a new administrative procedure).

And that was when I almost cried. I was behind on marking exercise books and really needed my free period to catch up on work. And I had more timetabled lessons than the typical teacher that day—including those lessons with the two rowdiest classes in the school—so it felt unfair that this extra lesson had fallen on my plate. And the note hadn't come with any guidelines or worksheets or textbook pages that the other teacher wanted me to use during their lesson, and I certainly hadn't had time to prepare anything to meaningfully fill in the gaps (it wasn't my subject; I didn't know these students because this wasn't one of the five classes that I taught; and I was already late so I couldn't even devise a stopgap activity). And who knew how many of the students had already wandered out of their classroom on various thinly justified errands because they'd heard that their teacher wasn't in school?

Two kindly, experienced colleagues calmed me down. It's all right, they said. It's true that you shouldn't have been assigned this lesson cover with so much on your timetable today, but it will be fine. Just go to the classroom, get the kids to settle down and keep more or less quiet, then sit at the teacher's table and do whatever work you otherwise would have done in the staffroom. Sometimes that's just what you have to do.

I made it through the day, barely.

Conversations about teacher professional norms in the Global South

The interviews and essays in this project all grapple with the norms that result in many teachers barely making it through the day—and many students barely learning. For the purposes of this project, the working definition of teacher professional norms is *dominant beliefs among teachers in a given context about what most of their peers will practise and prioritise*. Norms are often self-reinforcing; these dominant beliefs shape individual teachers' choices and actions; and when colleagues perceive these choices and actions, their perceptions strengthen dominant beliefs about typical practices and priorities. Such norms are a key reason why teachers in the school I taught in were summoned away from the classroom so regularly that one of the teachers in my school had the daily task of matching officially absent teachers' missed lessons to other teachers' free periods. All of this happened routinely was despite a national policy called Melindungi Masa Instruksional, or Protecting Instructional Time, which mostly seemed to create more paperwork for a different teacher who was in charge of recording every instance of a colleague getting summoned elsewhere.

I will explore this definition further in a forthcoming RISE paper.

Obligations to attend external meetings and to fulfil administrative reporting requirements are just two examples of the many *pressures* that shape teacher practice around the world. To be clear, external meetings and administrative paperwork can be useful tools for coordination and parity across classrooms and schools in large,

complex education systems. Yet the frustrating reality in all too many education systems is that the pressures generated by administrative obligations can overshadow teachers' sense of purpose, whether that means their individually articulated vocations or a shared sense of the overarching mission of the education system. Many of the conversations in this volume discuss instances where the teaching profession in a particular context has been dominated by a norm of process compliance. But alongside these grim accounts, the interlocutors and authors also discuss wonderfully varied possibilities in which individual teachers or groups of teachers transcend the counterproductive norms around them, or through which education systems can be incrementally reoriented toward a shared sense of purpose.

The challenge of maintaining purpose amid pressures affects the teaching profession globally. However, we focus on education systems in the Global South because these systems often face challenges that are far more acute, with far fewer resources to address them. Pre-pandemic data indicates that while 87 percent of 10-year-olds in Europe and Central Asia were able to read and understand a simple paragraph, only 13 percent of their peers in Sub-Saharan Africa could do so.

In many contexts, teachers are not adequately equipped and supported to deal with the magnitude of these challenges. For example, a 2007 survey in South Africa found that Grade 6 teachers had completed an average of 3.3 years of teacher training—yet only 21 percent of these teachers could pass a test of Grade 6 and 7 maths questions. Similarly, an analysis of data from Service Delivery Indicators (SDI) programme for Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo, and Uganda found that only 7 percent of Grade 4 teachers had the minimum subject knowledge needed for primary school language teaching. Under such circumstances, it would hardly be surprising if teachers feel unsupported and overwhelmed. As the interlocutors in this volume discuss, it can be tremendously demotivating to fall so far short of the expectations placed on you and your students.

One symptom of such demotivation is the fact that many contexts see grievously high rates of teacher absenteeism. For example, the same analysis of SDI data from seven countries found that 23 percent of teachers were absent from school and a further 21 percent were present in school but absent from their classrooms during an unannounced visit.

However, as the interlocutors in this volume make clear, demotivation is not the only reason for teachers' absence from the classroom. In some contexts, such absenteeism is not a result of teachers failing to fulfil occupational expectations. Rather, it is a result of teachers fulfilling occupational expectations that have nothing to do with classroom teaching, such as performing election duties or other community administration work. In other contexts, absenteeism results from (among other factors) low-effort organisational cultures that discourage any individual teachers from working harder than their colleagues.

For pre-pandemic literacy data, see World Bank. (2019). *Ending learning poverty: What will it take?* World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/32553>.

For teacher training in South Africa, see Makuwa, D. K. (2011). Characteristics of Grade 6 Teachers (No. 2; SAQMEQ Working Paper). Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality. http://www.sacmeq.org/sites/default/files/sacmeq/publications/02_teachers_final_05dec2011.pdf.

For teachers' content knowledge in South Africa, see Venkat, H., & Spaul, N. (2015). What do we know about primary teachers' mathematical content knowledge in South Africa? An analysis of SACMEQ 2007. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 41, 121–130. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2015.02.002>.

For SDI data, see Bold, T., Filmer, D., Martin, G., Molina, E., Stacy, B., Rockmore, C., Svensson, J., & Wane, W. (2017). Enrollment without Learning: Teacher Effort, Knowledge, and Skill in Primary Schools in Africa. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(4), 185–204. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.4.185>.

For observations on the demotivating effects of falling short of expectations, see, for example, remarks from interlocutors Lucy Crehan and Katlego Sengadi in [Chapter 6](#).

For observations on absenteeism resulting from non-classroom duties, see for example, remarks from interlocutors Shwetlana Sabarwal in [Chapter 3](#) and Laura Savage in [Chapter 15](#).

For observations on absenteeism resulting from organisational cultures, see remarks from interlocutor Masooda Bano in [Chapter 9](#).

The point here is *not* to attribute blame to teachers individually or collectively. During my two years of classroom teaching, blame games and guilt trips neither improved my pedagogical skills nor alleviated my sense of inadequacy. Instead, the point is that the circumstances confronting teachers in many education systems can make it tremendously difficult to pursue the purpose of the *teaching* profession. Such circumstances include capability issues related to the gap between curricular expectations and how teachers are selected, equipped, and supported. However, they also include a set of less frequently discussed but equally fundamental issues related to unfavourable norms in the teaching profession. The fact that some heroic teachers help their students to thrive despite such circumstances is remarkable and inspiring. Yet we owe it to students and teachers alike not only to celebrate these triumphs but also to be clear-sighted about the challenging realities in which they are embedded.

An overview of this asynchronous symposium

To explore and better understand the teacher norms that are interlinked with these challenges, I initiated this asynchronous symposium that brings together a range of interlocutors and discussants. Collectively, their experience and expertise related to teachers (or other frontline public-sector workers) spans every continent besides Antarctica, multiple academic disciplines (educational research, economics, public policy, behavioural science, sociology, development studies, cognitive neuroscience, cultural psychology), and diverse roles (teacher, teacher educator, coach, researcher, intergovernmental official, donor, consultant, writer, implementer).

The asynchronous symposium, as captured in this volume, begins with 14 paired interviews in which 28 different interlocutors discuss teacher professional norms with each other for roughly an hour. After each interview was transcribed, interlocutors were given the opportunity to edit their contributions to the conversation as much or as little as they wanted to, in the hope of combining the breadth of spontaneous conversations with the depth of unhurried reflections. Across the interviews, I used these three questions as a starting point:

- | In the contexts that you have worked in, what are some of the most influential norms that shape teacher practice (or the practices of other bureaucrats/frontline practitioners that you are familiar with)?
- | Why and how do these norms emerge and persist?
- | What are some approaches for reorienting detrimental norms toward systemwide improvement in education?

Despite starting from the same questions, the resulting 14 interviews went in excitingly varied directions. Nonetheless, several themes recurred across the interviews. In this introductory chapter to the volume, I focus on the themes of *purpose*, *pressures*, and *possibilities*, in line with the volume's title.

In this chapter, I use the briefer phrase “teacher norms” interchangeably with “teacher professional norms”.

A selection of other themes is explored in the three discussant essays that follow the interview transcripts. These essays were written respectively by Vu Dao and Khoa Vu, doctoral students at the University of Minnesota in comparative and international development education and in applied economics, respectively; Sameer Sampat, co-founder of Global School Leaders and the first CEO of the India School Leadership Institute; and Barbara Bruns, visiting fellow at the Center for Global Development and co-author of *Great teachers: How to raise student learning in Latin America and the Caribbean* (2015).

In the rest of this introductory chapter, I first outline a framework for mapping the competing factors that can shape teacher norms (Box 1). Next, I make the case that we cannot engage meaningfully with teacher professional norms unless we also engage with teachers' subjective perceptions. The remaining sections in this chapter address the three themes highlighted in the title of this volume—*purpose, pressures, and possibilities*—before concluding with a reflection about what it means for the teaching profession to profess a shared purpose.

Why do teacher norms and teachers' beliefs matter? The example of critical thinking and creativity

As mentioned in the previous section, in this project I conceptualise teacher norms as *dominant beliefs among teachers in a given context about what most of their peers will practise and prioritise*. One reason for emphasising teachers' beliefs is ethical: it is respectful and fair that conversations about the teaching profession should pay serious attention to teachers' perspectives, perceptions, experiences, agency, and beliefs. Another reason is both theoretical and practical: in *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms* (2017), social norms scholar Cristina Bicchieri argues that we cannot fully understand social norms by focusing on observable behaviours because the same behaviours can be driven by different underlying beliefs; and if we do not fully understand such underlying beliefs, then we cannot change the norms in question.

In cases where norms are pushing teachers toward undesirable practices and priorities, we can think of observable behaviours as symptoms, and dominant beliefs (i.e., norms) as the disease that needs to be diagnosed and treated. Yet these dominant beliefs are also a key ingredient in education systems—or regions, or districts, or schools—where teachers collaboratively and consistently put children's wellbeing at the centre of their practice.

To illustrate the role of beliefs and norms in teacher practice, consider the case of critical and creative thinking in teacher practice, as discussed by 5 of the 28 interlocutors and summarised in Figure 3. For example, interlocutor Juliet Wajega, Uganda country coordinator for Work: No Child's Business and former deputy general

For Vu and Khoa's essay, see Chapter 16, "A reflection on social norms around teachers in Vietnam".

For Sameer's essay, see Chapter 17, "The influence of schools in shaping teacher norms".

For Barbara's essay, see Chapter 18, "Teachers as the key to global learning progress".

Bruns, B., & Luque, J. (2015). *Great teachers: How to raise student learning in Latin America and the Caribbean*. World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/20488>.

Bicchieri, C. (2017). *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. Oxford University.

Box 1: A framework for mapping four domains that shape teacher norms: Selves, situations, standards, and society

In a forthcoming RISE paper, I propose a conceptual framework for mapping teacher norms and the factors that shape these norms. As shown in Figure 1, the factors shaping teacher norms—which often compete and/or overlap with other factors—can be mapped onto four different domains:

- | **selves**, or what most teachers value;
- | **situations**, or what most teachers believe to be possible in their schools and classrooms;
- | **standards**, or what most teachers perceive to be the formal or informal expectations of those in charge; and
- | **society**, or broader social, political, or economic influences.

With the exception of society, the domains in the framework are described in terms of teachers' subjective perceptions. This relates to a crucial point about norms: by definition, a norm is dominant across many individuals in a given context, yet the sort of norms discussed in this volume are rooted in individual-level perceptions. Moreover, their influence on teacher practice and student learning is filtered through individual teachers' perceptions. This is discussed further in the next section ("Why do teacher norms—and teachers' perceptions—matter? The example of critical thinking").

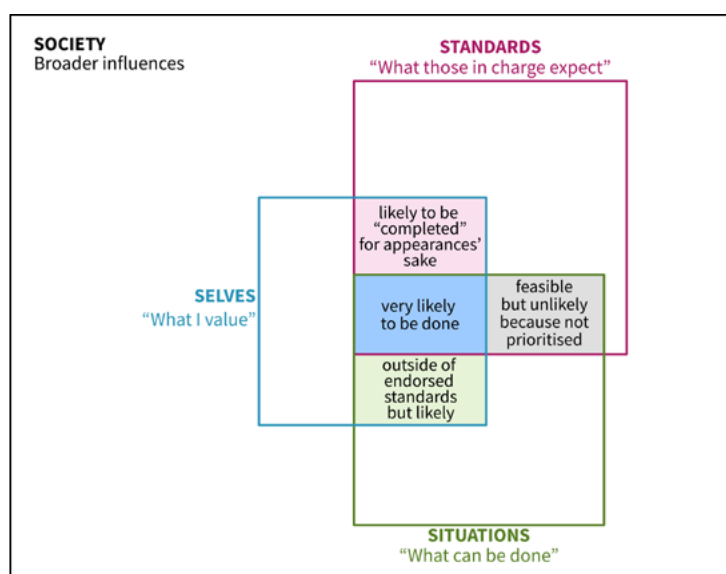


Figure 1: The four domains shaping teacher norms

This individual subjectivity means that what a teacher values (selves) include multiple desirable goals, some of which may be conflicting. Similarly, the same situation may be perceived as offering many actions that a teacher could take to improve children's development—or none at all. As for standards, teachers in most contexts may regard "those in charge" of setting expectations to the education ministry or by their headteacher; whereas in other situations, "those in charge" might instead be the teachers' union, a group of highly mobilised parents, or any combination thereof.

To illustrate, consider the following observation by interlocutor David K. Evans, a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development with extensive experience in studying education in developing countries:

Teachers have these pressures on them, related to, “You need to complete the curriculum, and you’re going to be judged on a pass rate.” So they say, “Well, if I’m going to be judged on my pass rate, then I guess what I have to do is focus on the students who are likely to pass. I mean, I do care about all my students, but I also care about keeping my job.”

So one of the dangers of these high-stakes accountability measures is that they can push teachers towards, for example, focusing on the students who have the best chance of passing, and not those students who are so far behind that even if you helped them learn a lot this year, you might not be able to help them pass the test. This might be especially true in countries where you have many students in class who are three, four, or five years behind the expected learning levels for their grade.

As shown in Figure 2, teachers’ selves are often divided between a purpose-driven desire to cultivate their students’ growth and an equally legitimate desire to support themselves and their families. Faced with pressure from standards that emphasise the completion of (often overcrowded) curricula and the achievement of (often unrealistic) pass rates, as well as situations in which the continued shortcomings of the education system are such that many students are far behind curricular expectations, a natural response is to pay the most attention to those children who are closest to the passing mark. While this response serves the pragmatic desire to not lose one’s job, it nevertheless narrows the purpose-driven desire to help all students to develop their capabilities. However, this response has been documented as a prevailing norm in a range of contexts, both in the Global South and the Global North.

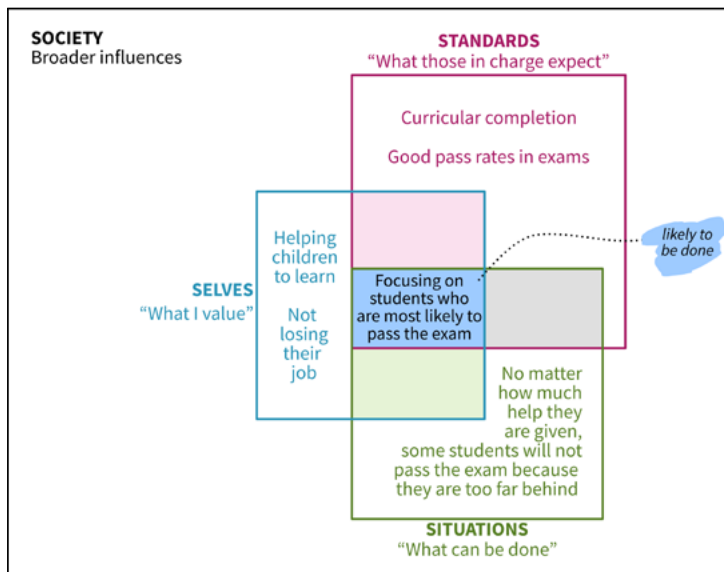


Figure 2: The norm of focusing on those students who are most likely to pass the exam is influenced by factors in different domains

Besides offering a way to diagram the factors that interact to shape teacher norms, this framework also implies a hypothesis: Practices and priorities are likely to become dominant norms among teachers in a given context if they are aligned with multiple elements across the domains of selves, situations, standards, and society. Simply put, teachers face competing pressures in different directions, so they are likely to move toward the directions that are indicted by multiple, overlapping pressures. This hypothesis about norms emerging at the intersection of pressures across multiple domains is represented by the shaded areas in Figure 1 at the intersection of different domains.

This framework will be used throughout this chapter to illustrate, using quotes from different interlocutors, the many and varied factors shaping the norms that affect teachers’ daily experiences.

secretary of the Uganda National Teachers' Union, shared the following experience of classroom teaching:

I was teaching science—chemistry and biology—and this was in a private school. And of course for private schools there is this sense of competition, where you must show results and students must pass so that they're able to attract more students to join their school. ...

From my personal experience, this will affect your classroom planning and your teaching. You are just expected to complete the syllabus, regardless of what the learners need, so you ignore other aspects of learning. And then, also, because you must make sure that your students pass, it's hard to have your own vision as a teacher. You are always under some pressure from the administration. So it affects your practice as a teacher. It affects your professional ethics. You may want to do something visionary, but you're under pressure. And, of course, it also affects the students—you don't allow them to be innovative because you're just not giving them enough time.

Besides the *standards* emphasising syllabus completion and exam results, Juliet mentions two factors that reinforce these standards: competition for student enrolment among private schools, a broader influence within the domain of *society*; and the limited time available during classroom lessons, which affects their perceptions of what can be done in their *situations*. These combined pressures from standards, society, and situations can overwhelm teachers' principled visions of what they value (*selves*). Two points are worth noting. Firstly, the factors Juliet identifies as shaping her experience as a teacher span across all four domains. Second, Juliet's account includes not only tangible choices and actions ("your classroom planning", "your teaching", and "your practice as a teacher"), but also the broader beliefs underlying these choices and actions ("your own vision", "your professional ethics").

In the preceding example from Juliet, the pressures on teacher practice result in a norm where, among other things, teachers place limits on students' opportunities to practice innovation during classroom lessons. Other interlocutors shared examples where the pressures on teacher practice result in norms that constrain teachers' own innovativeness, creativity, or critical thinking. For example, Kwame Akyeampong, professor of international education and development at the Open University, observed that:

... norms have their roots in policies that were enacted to shape the profession and that have gradually stabilised into what is expected of teachers generally—and often this is communicated through the teacher education system. ... So, if you go into a teacher education college in Ghana, for example, it's a boarding-school-style system, where teachers have to wake up at a certain time, they have to sweep the compound, they have to wear a uniform. All of this communicates certain values about the profession

For the full interview with Juliet and fellow interlocutor Barbara Tourier, see [Chapter 13](#).

For an op-ed by Juliet about the importance of teachers' perspectives in education reform, see Wajega, J. (2021, October 5). Teachers must be at the heart of post-Covid education recovery. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/eac8c311-f0e5-4bb8-9b0f-51ea5ed0b968>.

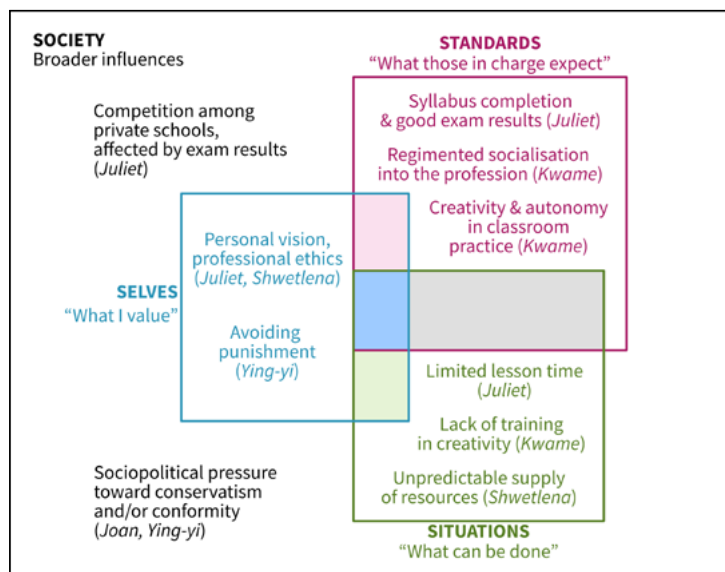


Figure 3: Norms related to critical thinking and creativity in teacher practice can be influenced by diverse factors across all four domains

and shapes how they become teachers. Becoming a teacher becomes very regimented.

It’s not easy to change this. And if you want teachers to be autonomous, to be creative, and yet you give them a training that stifles creativity and autonomy, then you’re not going to get them to become creative in the classroom.

Kwame’s example identifies two competing *standards*: the expectation that teachers will be creative and autonomous professionals, in tension with the expectation that teachers will conform to strict behavioural codes. Despite the ideological and idealistic appeal of creativity, Kwame suggests that conformity is more likely to be a dominant norm—especially when teachers have not received training in creativity but have been socialised into perceiving the teaching profession as regimented.

Such tensions can also shape teachers’ beliefs about what it means to think critically and creatively—and these beliefs, in turn, shape classroom practice. For example, Joan DeJaeghere, professor of comparative and international development education at the University of Minnesota and a principal investigator for the RISE Vietnam team, discussed the example of how critical thinking has been interpreted amid sociopolitical influences in Vietnamese *society*:

Critical thinking was initially included in that competency-based reform, and then it got axed. What happened was that competency-based education was approved by the party in 2012 or 13, I believe, and it’s just rolling out in textbooks now, almost nine years later. But through those years, it got reviewed very heavily by the bureaucrats in the system, to define it very carefully so that it would sit alongside the social and political goals of society. The social and political goals of society are more concerned with cultural

For the full interview with Kwame and fellow interlocutor Luis Crouch, see [Chapter 12](#).

For an example of Kwame’s research on this issue, see Akyeampong, K., Lussier, K., Pryor, J., & Westbrook, J. (2013). Improving teaching and learning of basic maths and reading in Africa: Does teacher preparation count? *International Journal of Educational Development*, 33(3), 272–282. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2012.09.006>.

For the full interview with Joan and fellow interlocutor Shwetlena Sabarwal, see [Chapter 3](#).

For Joan’s research on competency-based education in Vietnam, see Duong, B.-H. & DeJaeghere, J. (2022). From Student-Centered to Competency-Based Reform: Exploring Teachers’ Perspective of Meaningful Participation. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/089. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/089.

conservatism—maintaining a norm rather than completely disrupting it. So, as I said, critical thinking was left out of it.

And as we’ve talked to teachers, we’ve been asking, “What is critical thinking? How do you do it?” And there are always exceptional cases, but, broadly, it’s very much related to the subject of math and deductive thinking.

Thus, in this example, the competing goals of critical thinking on the one hand and sociopolitical conservatism are reconciled because teachers interpret critical thinking as primarily related to apolitical, technical reasoning in mathematics lessons.

In contrast, another interlocutor shared an example where critical thinking in classroom practice has been hampered not because of sociopolitical continuity, but rather sociopolitical disruption; and where these factors influence teachers’ beliefs not by shaping their interpretations of what it means to think critically, but rather by colouring their expectations of how that would affect their personal or professional safety. According to Ying-yi Hong, social psychologist and Choh-Ming Li Professor of Management at the Chinese University of Hong Kong:

... before the 2019 social movement in Hong Kong, I think teachers had a high degree of freedom of expression in the classroom. And many teachers would not have problems selecting their teaching materials or what they want to use in their classroom teaching. But after that point, now that we are in a transition, many things have become politicised. There are red lines that some teachers might sometimes step on, or they might be seen as violating certain regulations. Actually, oftentimes, it might not matter as much whether their expectations or worries—that what they say might be seen as infringing on the national security law—are valid or not, because they might self-censor. So that might describe the situation in Hong Kong now, a transition for some norms of self-expression.

The centrality of teachers’ beliefs is evident in Ying-yi’s emphasis that teachers may self-censor because of “their expectations or worries ... [whether] valid or not”. Additionally, the complexity of teachers’ beliefs is evident in Ying-yi’s observation elsewhere in the interview that teachers in Hong Kong have long expected students to be quiet and unquestioning in the classroom—despite the freedom of expression that they themselves expected and enjoyed.

This multi-layered complexity of teachers’ beliefs is one reason why Shwetlena Sabarwal, a senior economist at the World Bank who is currently writing a book on teacher mindsets and motivation, gave the following caution:

... there is a danger that you caricature teachers as these passive recipients who are acting out these rooted social things. I think it’s more active than that. ... in 2008, when we saw that headteachers were holding books and not distributing them to children—that was one of my first papers—I was very dissatisfied with how that finding was framed. Because some observers

For the full interview with Ying-yi and fellow interlocutor Masooda Bano, see [Chapter 9](#).

For an example of Ying-yi’s research on sociocultural influences on cognition, see Hong, Y.-Y., Morris, M. W., Chiu, C.-Y., & Benet-Martínez, V. (2000). Multicultural minds: A dynamic constructivist approach to culture and cognition. *American Psychologist*, 55(7), 709–720. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.7.709>.

For the full interview with Shwetlena and fellow interlocutor Joan DeJaeghere, see [Chapter 3](#).

For an example of Shwetlena’s research on teacher mindsets, see Sabarwal, S., Abu-Jawdeh, M., & Kapoor, R. (2022). Teacher Beliefs: Why They Matter and What They Are. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 37(1), 73–106. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lkab008>.

thought, “Oh, those headteachers just don’t care.” But it wasn’t that. They just didn’t know when the next shipment would come. So they were trying to smooth their consumption. It was a completely rational decision. ... Then [the observers] kept thinking that training the headteachers is going to change things, but the training would have done bupkis, right? It would have done zero. ... we have to really understand their thought process and not be very quick to assign people to these inescapable social and cultural factors.

While the previous examples relate to various aspects of critical and creative thinking in classroom practice, Shwetlena’s example relates to critical and creative thinking in the management of resources amid perceived constraints in the school *situation*—and to a lack of rigorous, respectful understanding on the part of observers. As Shwetlena argued, we cannot fully understand teacher norms unless we recognise teachers’ agency amid all of the complex pressures shaping their practice. And, as other interlocutors argued, a pivotal element of teacher agency is their sense of purpose.

Purpose is central to motivation—but systemic factors often erode teacher motivation

One theme that strongly emerges across the conversations in this volume—and, indeed, across the research literature—is that a sense of purpose is vital to individual work motivation and job satisfaction, and also to a collective sense of professionalism. This is true of any profession. As discussed by Margarita Gómez, former principal advisor to Mexico’s Minister of Public Safety and founder of the People in Government Lab at Oxford University’s Blavatnik School of Government:

We constantly ask questions around, “What motivates public employees?” or, “How can we change behaviours of public employees?”

There are three main elements that usually come out, and they all are moving away from the “rational” model. One element is giving purpose to public employees. And the purpose can change—even in one institution, there might be a different purpose for each public employee, and I think that recognising that difference is good. Another element is understanding or finding meaning in the work that they are doing. Then there is this other element of really enjoying the job and getting satisfaction from it, and knowing what impact they are having in a pro-social way.

The centrality of purpose in education systems is also a recurring theme in recent research from the RISE Programme. Sadly, another clear finding from this research is that the sense of both individual and systemwide purpose in the teaching profession is often eroded by various systemwide pressures.

Related concepts in psychology include “perspective taking” and the need to overcome “empathy gaps”. See, for example: Grant, A. M., & Berry, J. W. (2011). The Necessity of Others is The Mother of Invention: Intrinsic and Prosocial Motivations, Perspective Taking, and Creativity. *Academy of Management Journal*, 54(1), 73–96. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2011.59215085>; Gutsell, J. N., & Inzlicht, M. (2012). Intergroup differences in the sharing of emotive states: Neural evidence of an empathy gap. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 7(5), 596–603. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsr035>.

For the full interview with Margarita and fellow interlocutor Wendy Kopp, see [Chapter 5](#).

For an example of Margarita’s research on motivation and management in the public sector, see Ali, A. J., Fuenzalida, J., Gómez, M., & Williams, M. J. (2021). Four lenses on people management in the public sector: An evidence review and synthesis. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 37(2), 335–366. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/grab003>.

For RISE research on purpose, see, for example, Honig, D. (2022). Managing for Motivation as Public Performance Improvement Strategy in Education & Far Beyond. Research on Improving Systems of Education. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-Misc_2022/04; Kaffenberger, M. The role of “purpose” in education system outcomes: A conceptual framework and empirical examples. Forthcoming in the RISE Working Paper Series.

Sharath Jeevan, founder and former CEO of STiR Education and current executive chairman of Intrinsic Labs, identifies one such factor as an overemphasis on regulation and standardisation within the education system:

... we create order in systems in a way that severs the link with the ultimate beneficiary, to the child ... it starts to become a self-fulfilling system, where what really matters is bureaucratic compliance. I think that's why teachers are so demotivated in most countries, because they can't see the ultimate link to children.

It's crazy because teaching is, intrinsically, an incredibly purposeful profession, but somehow the system makes it very much about the civil service piece and fulfilling those norms. And that link [to the child] becomes so buried that you forget what it was like to start in the profession in the first place. I think most teachers do have a level of intrinsic motivation to begin with. But a challenge is that when you try to wake up that sense of intrinsic motivation and help teachers remember why they went into the profession, there's also a sense of being vulnerable, because there's a worry about punishment, as you said, Dan. It's almost like a strange psychological trap, where they know in their heart of hearts what they should be doing purpose-wise, but they also know that the entire system keeps them from getting anywhere near that ultimate destination.

Beyond the logic of complying with bureaucratic processes to maintain order, another factor that can erode purpose in an education system is the incentives facing political decision-makers who share systemwide priorities. In the words of Belay Hagos Hailu, associate professor of education and director of the Institute of Educational Research at Addis Ababa University and a member of the RISE Ethiopia team:

I would say it's about the political economy of learning as well. How does the government perceive learning? It is not a priority after all, for the government. So that is an issue in our context. What matters is expansion. People can easily see and count the number of teachers, they can count the number of schools built in every village. But the details of teaching and learning will not matter for the politicians. What matters for politicians is the number of schools, number of students, number of teachers, which is highly visible—and nobody's asking about learning. So that is the source of the problem. If politicians are committed, learning could be a priority. And if learning is a priority, then the government can push forward to make a change. But as I said earlier, what is visible is seen as more important than the invisible, which we call learning.

Figure 4 maps out some of the competing factors for and against a sense of purpose in the teaching profession, as described by Margarita, Sharath, and Belay. These challenging realities were neatly described by political theorist Bernardo Zacka in his work on street-level bureaucrats (i.e., frontline public servants, including teachers):

For the full interview with Sharath and fellow interlocutor Dan Honig, see [Chapter 4](#).

For more on Sharath's work on intrinsic motivation, see Jeevan, S. (2021). *Intrinsic: A manifesto to reignite our inner drive*. Endeavour. <https://www.hachette.co.uk/titles/sharath-jeevan/intrinsic/9781913068394/>. You can also listen to this RISE Podcast episode featuring Sharath: <https://riseprogramme.org/podcast/sharath-jeevan>.

For the full interview with Belay and fellow interlocutor Shintia Revina, see [Chapter 7](#).

For an example of Belay's research on teacher professional identity, see Samsudin, M. A., Moen, M. C., Hai, P. T. T., Hagos Hailu, B., Hidayat, A., Ishida, Y., Kusakabe, T., Ozawa, H., Ishak, N. A., Malik, S. A., Ismail, B. M., Owoyemi, T. E., Anangisyse, W. A., Mgonda, N. L., Asiimwe, J. A., & Kyasanku, C. (2021). Indicators for the Measurement of Teachers' Professional Identity across Asia and Africa: A Delphi Study. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 56(8). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909621992785>.

street-level bureaucrats are placed on a recurring basis in choice situations that are bound to threaten their self-image as dedicated and capable public servants. They experience an ongoing tension between their lofty aims and their limited capabilities, and between their aspiration to “do a good job” and the conflict that is bound to arise, especially when resources are scarce, between the various normative demands to which they must attend. This setup is structurally bound to generate dissonance. This dissonance will, in turn, be experienced vividly because the stakes are high, the clients proximate, and the decisions discretionary (Zacka, 2017, p. 125).

These bleak realities are not the end of the story. As the conversations in this volume show, there are many exciting possibilities for restoring a sense of purpose to teachers and the wider education system alike. However, before exploring these ways forward, it is worth understanding the scope of the challenge in greater depth.

Zacka, B. (2017). *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency*. Harvard University Press.

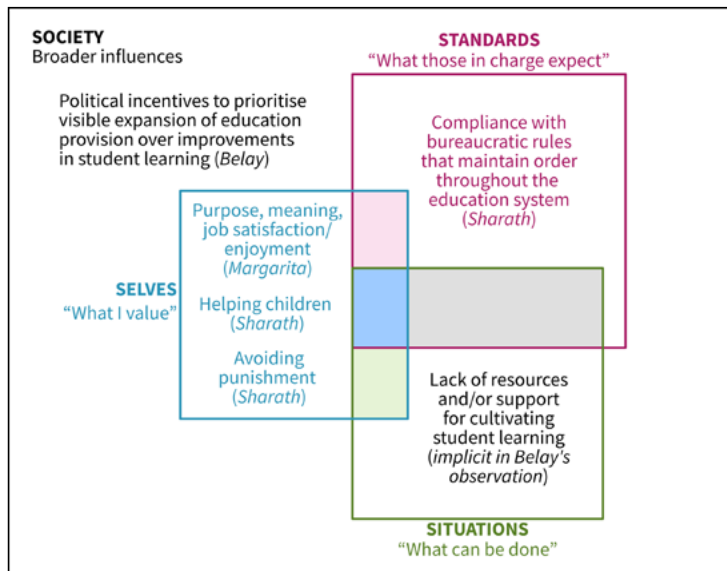


Figure 4: A teacher’s sense of professional purpose is often undermined by factors across different domains of the education system

Pressures on all sides: Snapshots of teachers’ daily challenges

One repeated observation from the interviews and essays in this project is that teachers face competing demands from different directions. Competing demands are an unavoidable part of human experience. Yet the conversations in this project suggest that teachers in many education systems grapple with a particularly damaging form of competing demands, in that these demands orient dominant teacher norms away from individual teachers’ sense of purpose and from officially articulated systemwide goals of cultivating children’s learning and development holistically.

Besides the factors explored in previous sections and summarised in Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4, another set of pressures identified by interlocutors was economic circumstances in *society*. For example, Katlego Sengadi, regional coordinator for Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) at Youth Impact and former classroom teacher in

Botswana, observed that the lack of desirable alternatives for employment reinforced the norm of prioritising curricular delivery and test preparation in the classroom:

... you come into school with this mindset of what teaching is supposed to look like. But when you get inside the actual classroom, and you face some of the challenges that teachers face, then it becomes more like you need to reach just the minimal bar—“This is what I need to get my students through”—and that’s it. ...

In Botswana, the sad situation is that now teachers don’t drop out. They just become so unmotivated to do anything that they just go to class, do the minimum that is expected of them, and go home, because they can’t quit due to lack of employment, et cetera, et cetera. Most of them actually got into the profession not because they’re passionate about it, but because of a lack of other jobs. So now that becomes like a double demotivator, for a teacher to have to say, “Okay, there’s so much that is expected of me, but I don’t even have the time to do that. Plus, I don’t like the job that I’m doing.” So now the students are the ones that have to suffer.

Note that Katlego also mentions the influence of *situations*, in noting that time constraints affect teachers’ perceptions of what can be done. Katlego’s full account of her experience as a novice teacher in Botswana also includes pressures from unattainable *standards*.

In turn, Shintia Revina, the former deputy team leader of RISE Indonesia who is now a postdoctoral researcher at the Eindhoven University of Technology, emphasised a combination of sociocultural traditions (*society*) and organisational expectations across the civil service (*standards*):

Actually, in Indonesia, maybe it’s more about the intersection between sociocultural and organisational norms. This is related to the fact that our teachers in our public schools are recruited through the civil servant recruitment system. The majority of the people in Indonesia come from Javanese culture, and according to Javanese tradition we have this so-called obedience culture. So, what matters to teachers is to follow the regulations as a civil servant. What matters to teachers is to follow the instructions from the MoEC, or the local education agency. And being an excellent teacher is second to being a good civil servant.

What I mean by being a good civil servant is that an officer has to follow orders and has to respect their superiors—in this case, for teachers, the superior is the school principal or their school supervisors. It also means working according to the minimum hours per week, because it’s stated really clearly in the evaluation criteria of civil servants that you have to work according to these minimum hours. So already their performance standard is very low; it’s just attendance. And then they have to submit required

For the full interview with Katlego and fellow interlocutor Lucy Crehan, see [Chapter 6](#).

For more on the work of Katlego and her colleagues at the organisation Youth Impact, see <https://www.youth-impact.org/tarl>.

For the full interview with Shintia and fellow interlocutor Belay Hagos Hailu, see [Chapter 7](#).

For an example of Shintia’s research on teachers in Indonesia, see Alifia, U., Pramana, R.P., & Revina, S. (2022). A Policy Lens on Becoming a Teacher: A Longitudinal Diary Study of Novice Teacher Professional Identity Formation in Indonesia. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/096. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/096.

reports and paperwork from time to time. Delivering quality teaching is not part of the demands that a civil-service teacher has to fulfil.

A different set of pressures emerged in an example in Bangladesh as related by Laura Savage, executive director of the International Education Funders Group and member of the RISE Delivery Board. In this case, tensions emerged between the conceptions of teaching and learning that were held by teachers (*selves*) and parents (*society*), on one hand, and the conception of teaching and learning that was implicit in a new educational programme based on the TaRL approach that had been recommended by international donors after it proved successful in neighbouring India:

A lot of it came down to expectations from both teachers and parents about the style of teaching. This was in a context where BRAC has been an incredibly successful NGO, so we thought that people might understand this new programme because it was similar to the kinds of approaches that BRAC were taking in the early years. But what we hadn't quite appreciated—although note that this is not substantiated with systematic data—is that the expectation was that once a child had graduated out of a BRAC accelerated learning programme or early childhood programme, then they would go to school and learn “properly”. And the idea that teachers might break children into groups with different ability levels or not pursue rote learning to the test was just unacceptable—firstly to teachers, who were worried that these incredibly new expectations were going entirely against everything that they had been given to believe was the approach that you should take to teaching. And it was unacceptable to parents, who were saying, “We're not going to get anything out of this programme, because you're not teaching our children properly.”

That, for me, was a very big learning experience about the kinds of policies and processes and projects that have been designed in ways that just don't appreciate the very basic need to engage with existing behaviours and existing expectations.

Beyond such approaches to pedagogy, education researchers have argued that approaches to teacher evaluation and school organisation must also be coherent with how teachers and other actors in the local context conceptualise the nature of classroom teaching.

A final example of the pressures and factors shaping teacher norms comes from Verónica Cabezas, associate professor of education at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and president of the board of a teacher policy and advocacy organisation named Elige Educar. While recognising the importance of macro-level norms, Verónica stressed the centrality of micro-level norms within the school:

... there are so many norms inside of the school that sometimes are almost invisible. The school principal sets the norms—for example, maybe to motivate collaboration, or for more empowerment of teachers. Or they can

For the full interview with Laura and fellow interlocutor Carlos Vargas Tamez, see [Chapter 15](#).

For more on Laura's work with the International Education Funders Group, see <https://www.iefg.org/about/>. See also this introduction to a special issue on measuring learning in education systems that Laura co-edited: Crouch, L., Kaffenberger, M., & Savage, L. (2021). Using learning profiles to inform education priorities: An editors' overview of the Special Issue. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 86, 102477. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102477>.

See, for example, Wise, A. E., Darling-Hammond, L., McLaughlin, M. W., & Bernstein, H. T. (1985). Teacher Evaluation: A Study of Effective Practices. *The Elementary School Journal*, 86(1), 61–121; and Rowan, B. (1990). Commitment and Control: Alternative Strategies for the Organizational Design of Schools. *Review of Research in Education*, 16(1), 353–389. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X016001353>.

discuss the vision, like what are the goals for students—maybe introducing a vision where socioemotional skills are equally important compared to the academic piece. So what I’m trying to say is that the school norms at the micro level are so, so important. ...

One thing that’s very important is, of course, leadership and relationships within teams in schools—Jessica, maybe you have studied that. For example, what’s happening in our schools around how they use their non-teaching hours? Are they collaborating? Are they working in teams? Are they working alone? How is the physical space for doing that—are they working alone in an isolated space, or do they really have a space where they can connect and speak about professional things? Are they sharing instructional materials and planning lessons together?

In addition to offering examples of *situational* factors that teachers face, Verónica’s observation also offers a reminder that *standards* can emerge not only at the level of the civil service or of education authorities, but also at the level of the individual school, where school principals may develop distinct visions for the students and teachers they manage. The overlapping pressures described in this section by Katlego, Shintia, Laura, and Verónica are summarised in Figure 5.

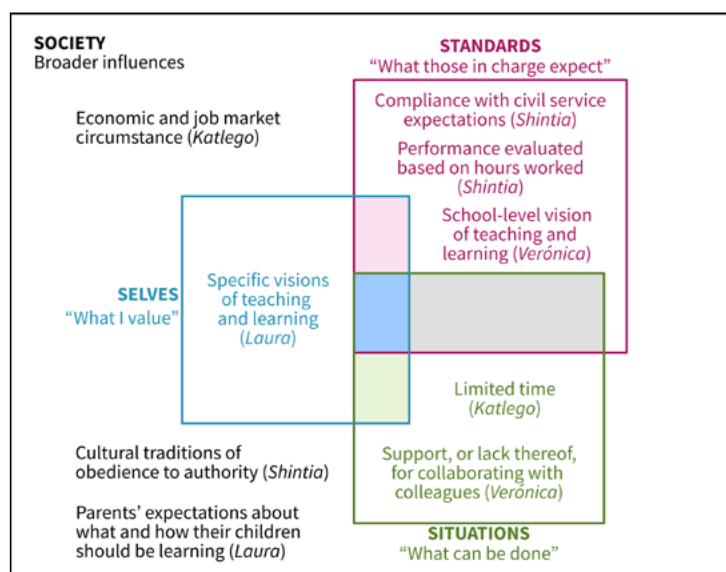


Figure 5: In addition to pressures toward curricular completion and exam results, teachers face a wide range of competing pressures

Moving again from specific examples of teachers’ experiences to the broader research literature, Michael Lipsky’s words on street-level bureaucrats are instructive:

We can now restate the problem of street-level bureaucracy as follows. Street-level bureaucrats attempt to do a good job in some way. The job, however, is in a sense impossible to do in ideal terms. How is the job to be accomplished with inadequate resources, few controls, indeterminate objectives, and discouraging circumstances?

There are three general responses that street-level bureaucrats develop to deal with this indeterminacy. First, they develop patterns of practice that tend to limit demand, maximize the utilization of available resources, and obtain client compliance over and above the procedures developed by their agencies. They organize their work to derive a solution within the resource constraints they encounter. Second, they modify their concept of their jobs, so as to lower or otherwise restrict their objectives and thus reduce the gap between available resources and achievement objectives. Third, they modify their concept of the raw materials with which they work—their clients—so as to make much more acceptable the gap between accomplishments and objectives. Much of the patterned behavior of street-level bureaucrats, and many of their characteristic subjective orientations, may be understood as responses to the street-level bureaucracy problem (Lipsky, 2010 [1980], pp. 82–83).

Lipsky, M. (2010 [1980]). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services (30th anniversary expanded ed)*. Russell Sage Foundation.

It is worth noting that the possible responses to competing, cross-domain pressures (as identified by Lipsky) are themselves related to different domains: informal norms that modify formal *standards*, modified conceptions of professional values that fall within *selves*, and modified perceptions of their *situations*. In the sections that follow, I explore a range of purpose-driven possibilities for teacher norms that also cut across various domains.

Possibility: Engage with the embeddedness of teacher norms as a virtue, not an obstacle

The embeddedness of teacher norms in a range of overlapping domains—which are conceptualised in this project as *selves*, *situations*, *standards*, and *society*—can undoubtedly pose challenges for reform. However, as I argue below, if we pay thoughtful attention to this embeddedness, it may also reveal possible levers for change. First, I delve a bit more into the embeddedness of teacher norms and some of the challenges emerging from this embeddedness.

Teacher norms interact with other elements of the systems in which they are embedded ...

Teachers' work and, by extension, teacher norms are embedded in various domains within a given education system. One implication of this embeddedness is that teaching involves interactions with many other people and requires teachers to make decisions to suit the particular configuration of circumstances in their classrooms. Or, to use the terminology of Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, and interlocutor Michael Woolcock's *Building State Capability*, teaching is a transaction intensive and locally

Andrews, M., Pritchett, L., & Woolcock, M. (2017). *Building state capability: Evidence, analysis, action*. Oxford University Press. <https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/building-state-capability-evidence-analysis-action>. (Or, to use Ronald Heifetz's adaptive leadership framework, reorienting teacher norms that don't serve children's needs is not a technical problem, but rather an adaptive challenge. See Heifetz, R. A. (1994). *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Harvard University Press.)

discretionary activity—which means that issues in education service delivery cannot be resolved in a straightforward, logistical way.

In his interview, Michael, who is lead social scientist in the World Bank’s Development Research Group, compared the embeddedness of norms to the nestedness of Russian matryoshka dolls, with “multiple little ecosystems that are interacting with each other”. He went on to describe a consequence of this embeddedness as follows:

This social stuff doesn’t have a neat formula, an $E=mc^2$, next to it, such that you can just press a button and watch beautiful stuff happen. It has to be painstakingly constructed in the face of a lot of indifference or opposition, in the sense of competing with what’s normal and normative in other people’s lives. And, as Melanie was suggesting, if a teacher is doing that alone, the sustained pressure of trying to change what is normal and normative for others can eventually break you. What any individual teacher does has to be undertaken as part of something bigger. The teachers need to have that sense that there is positive tone setting in the school—mostly set by the principal—about what it means to be part of this larger community, and how we learn to get along.

For the full interview with Michael and fellow interlocutor Melanie Ehren, see [Chapter 10](#).

For more of Michael’s thoughts on a related topic, see Woolcock, M., & Narayan, D. (2000). Social Capital: Implications for Development Theory, Research, and Policy. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 15(2), 225–249. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/15.2.225>.

In short, systemic change—or even sustainable individual-level change—requires changes across the different domains in which teachers are embedded.

Later in the same interview, interlocutor Melanie Ehren, professor in educational governance and director of the LEARN! Research Institute at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, elaborated on the need for cross-domain change:

I don’t think that any single approach—in terms of improving professional development or initial teacher training or introducing greater accountability or increasing salary or what have you—will work on its own. So it really needs a multidimensional approach.

For the full interview with Melanie and fellow interlocutor Michael Woolcock, see [Chapter 10](#).

For an example of Melanie’s research in which she uses a multidimensional framework, Ehren, M., & Baxter, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Trust, Accountability and Capacity in Education System Reform: Global Perspectives in Comparative Education*. Routledge. <https://business-school.open.ac.uk/research/projects/trust-capacity-and-accountability>.

What that will look like will vary across contexts, depending on what kinds of norms you want to improve, where that needs to be done, and in which particular context—because each country will have different ecosystems within the country as well. So it requires a good understanding of how teachers are functioning within each country—whether they’re in well-aligned communities like Michael was talking about, or in different types of ecosystems with different types of norms that need improvement—and an understanding of why those norms contexts are the way they are. And then it takes thinking about how to address all of that in a multidimensional, multilevel approach.

Another implication of the embeddedness of teacher norms is that such cross-domain change can take a long time. This is not the realm of silver bullets and quick fixes. As articulated by interlocutor Yamini Aiyar, president and chief executive of India’s Centre for Policy Research:

So when we think about how to change norms, we need to recognise that change is not a matter of simply changing the metric. It's actually about long, deep engagement with the changed metric in a way that allows the teacher to work through that journey of transition. And that will not give you the kind of outcomes you want in a year, in two years, in three years. And that's always a challenge, right? Reformers need to see some kind of output to justify and legitimise their reform. But the truth is that reform is not about those outputs. Reform is actually about changing how people see themselves—and that change is a slow and complex process. It involves building trust. It involves seeing by doing. And it also involves the reformer being comfortable with saying, "I'm not going to get the dramatic changes I want. I'm only going to get very minor, incremental changes, but it's in those incremental changes that the big shift will take place."

The need for "long, deep engagement" with beliefs, perceptions, and relationships in order to change norms was also emphasised by other interlocutors, including Dan Honig (who observed that norms "do shift—even if slowly, and on the margin—and they shift when enough people's minds shift on an individual level, and we get to a tipping point") and Michael (who described the work of norms change as "a wager with yourself and with everybody else that if you stick at it long enough, across these multiple nested levels, and deal with the inevitable violations of those norms—and with the sometimes quite dispiriting setbacks that occur along the way—then somehow magic will happen"). Thus, several interlocutors agreed that the complex embeddedness of norms means that norms change is a gradual, multidimensional process.

Yet this embeddedness also means that there can be ways of revitalising professional norms beyond the centralised, technical approaches that often dominate policy reform.

... and these context-specific elements offer opportunities for strengthening professional norms

One approach for changing teacher professional norms draws on the fact that teachers are embedded in peer networks, and that these networks can shape teachers' perceptions of what can be done in their classroom and school *situations*. In response to interlocutor Katlego's description of how demonstration effects and peer modelling had changed some teachers' pedagogical approaches in schools implementing Teaching at the Right Level in Botswana, fellow interlocutor Lucy Crehan, a celebrated author and international education consultant who was previously a classroom teacher, remarked:

I think that's a really powerful way of effecting change because it's difficult to convince teachers to change their behaviours without changing their beliefs. And one of the sticking points, I think, for teachers hearing about

For the full interview with Yamini and fellow interlocutor Soufia Siddiqi, see [Chapter 8](#).

For Yamini's book on education reform in Delhi, see Aiyar, Y., Davis, V., Govindan, G., & Kapoor, T. (2021). *Rewriting the Grammar of the Education System: Delhi's Education Reform (A Tale of Creative Resistance and Creative Disruption)*. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE). https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-Misc_2021/01.

See [Chapter 4](#).

See [Chapter 10](#).

For the full interview with Lucy and fellow interlocutor Katlego Sengadi, see [Chapter 6](#).

For Lucy's book describing her time spent with teachers and schools in several countries, see Crehan, L. (2016). *Cleverlands: The secrets behind the success of the world's education superpowers*. Unbound. <https://unbound.com/books/cleverlands/>.

something that's happening somewhere else is, "Yeah, that might work there. But that won't work with my kids. They don't understand my context." So if you can show them, "Actually, we are working with the very same class that you're teaching, and look what is possible," then that's such a powerful way to change those teacher beliefs.

Besides offering an avenue for changing teachers' perceptions of their *situations*, peer networks can also change teacher norms through other mechanisms. For example, in a blog discussing a RISE Indonesia study of how computer-based testing reduced cheating in schools, Emilie Berkhout observed that cheating decreased not only in the schools that had introduced computer-based testing, but also in neighbouring schools that used the older, more vulnerable paper-based tests. Emilie posits that these spillover effects resulted from reduced circulation of answer sheets ahead of exam dates (i.e., a practical rather than perceived change in *situations*), as well as teachers from computer-based testing schools being stricter in proctoring paper-based tests (i.e., a change in informal *standards*).

Looking beyond peer networks, there may also be avenues for changing teacher norms by engaging constructively with the larger sociocultural factors in the *societies* which these norms are embedded. For example, Masooda Bano, professor of development studies at the University of Oxford and principal investigator for the RISE Political Economy of Implementation team, observed that policymakers often miss the opportunity to align *standards* with longstanding local understandings of what it means to be a good teacher:

In Islamic culture, traditionally the Prophet himself is seen as a teacher—he's the idealised teacher. So that conception of the teacher is present in broader society, even if state-school teachers don't draw that inspiration actively when teaching but think of it instead as a transaction, as a job they're paid to do. But you can mobilise that motivation quite easily because the norm is quite dominant in the society. Do you get my point? I think these kinds of motivations are under-explored in the international development sector, as well as by the state. Because in this postcolonial context, the state wants to use language that is all about secular, modern discourse. So the religious discourse is actively crowded out, when in fact it is a very important motivation that can still be mobilised, in my view, in state schools. ...

I'm not trying to undermine financial incentives, but all I'm saying is that the balance of the two can enhance your ability to mobilise many more teachers in these countries. But the state and donors just don't have any idea how to do it.

The KIAT Guru programme in remote schools in Indonesia offers a related example of a policy change that successfully altered teacher norms because, among other factors, it suited the socioculturally embedded relationships in the village communities. Under KIAT Guru, relationships between higher-status teachers and lower-status community

Berkhout, E. (2020, September 16). How Computers Helped Indonesia Move From a Cheating Culture to a Learning Culture. RISE Programme Blog. <https://riseprogramme.org/blog/computers-indonesia-cheating-learning>.

For more on mechanisms for norms change via demonstration effects, see Bicchieri (2017) on trendsetters and Guskey's (2002) argument that teachers' beliefs change upon seeing positive outcomes in their own classrooms (rather than colleagues' classrooms). Bicchieri, C. (2017). *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. Oxford University Press. Guskey, T. R. (2002). Professional Development and Teacher Change. *Teachers and Teaching*, 8(3), 381–391. <https://doi.org/10.1080/135406002100000512>.

For the full interview with Masooda and fellow interlocutor Ying-yi Hong, see [Chapter 9](#).

For an example of Masooda's research on motivation and religion in education, see Bano, M. (2022). Curricula that Respond to Local Needs: Analysing Community Support for Islamic and Quranic Schools in Northern Nigeria. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/103. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/103.

members were strengthened by providing community members with a technology-aided, externally supported tool that gave them the legitimacy to hold teachers accountable to mutually agreed *standards*.

Besides these larger *societal* patterns of status hierarchies and religious ideals, another entry point for changing teacher norms involves embeddedness in the local community. Interlocutor Wendy Kopp, CEO and co-founder of Teach For All, shared an example of how incorporating immersion in, and reflection about, the relationship between local communities and education had a profound effect on teacher norms:

Over time, we’ve learned how important it is in teacher professional development programmes to focus directly on mindset development. To this point, I was just thinking about an early experience in Teach For All. Teach For India looked at Teach For America’s approach to training and supporting teachers, and they said, “We’re going to take this approach that is 90 percent about developing skills and knowledge and 10 percent working on mindsets, and we’re going to make it 60 percent skills and knowledge and 40 percent mindsets.” I’m making up those percentages, but they really shifted the balance to mindset development. And so, for example, one day they would have their fellows work alongside the parents of the kids whom they were going to be working with. And then the teaching fellows would reflect on that experience, and among other things it deepened their understanding of the challenges facing students and families, and of the stakes of their work. Or they sent them out in the community with no resources at all and gave them a big task, which fostered this deep sense of possibility about what they could accomplish.

Wendy’s observations also add weight to the argument that teachers’ subjective beliefs and perceptions are fundamental to teacher norms (see “Why do teacher norms and teachers’ beliefs matter? The example of critical thinking and creativity”, above).

Figure 6 maps out the *possibilities* encapsulated in Lucy’s, Masooda’s, and Wendy’s observations to the four-domain framework—along with other *possibilities* related to the interplay between individual autonomy and systemic support, which I discuss in the next section.

Possibility: Create support structures that foster teacher autonomy while upholding systemwide priorities

Besides possibilities that emerge when engaging with the nested factors that shape teacher norms, the interviews in this volume also point to another fertile area for norms change: rethinking the relationship between teacher autonomy and systemwide authority. In this section, I first explore the relationship between autonomy

On KIAT Guru, see Gaduh, A. B., Pradhan, M. P., Priebe, J., & Susanti, D. (2021). Scores, Camera, Action: Social Accountability and Teacher Incentives in Remote Areas. In *Policy Research Working Paper Series* (No. 9748; Policy Research Working Paper Series). World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36112>; and Hwa, Y.-Y., Lumbanraja, S.K., Riyanto, U.A., & Susanti, D. (2022). The Role of Coherence in Strengthening Community Accountability for Remote Schools in Indonesia. RISE Working Paper Series, 22/090. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/090.

For the full interview with Wendy and fellow interlocutor Margarita Gómez, see [Chapter 5](#).

For more reflections from Wendy on mindsets and other elements of educational change, see <https://wendykopp-tfall.medium.com/what-ive-learned-it-will-take-to-re-make-the-world-7620fbf1228f>.

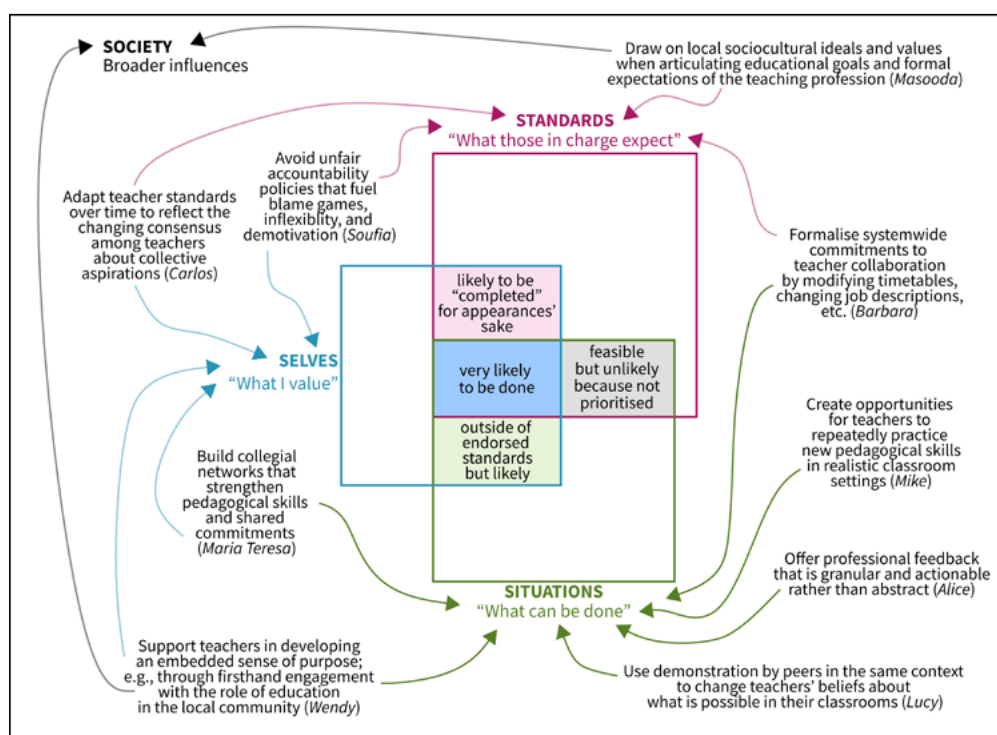


Figure 6. Possibilities for changing teacher norms can span across multiple domains in which teachers are embedded

and control, before outlining some promising possibilities at the level of classroom pedagogy and of education policy, respectively.

There is often a tension between teacher autonomy and systemwide control ...

Often, there appears to be a trade-off between individual autonomy on one hand, and systemwide control (or, more benignly, alignment with collective goals) on the other hand. Some facets of this trade-off were discussed by interlocutor Jessica Holloway, a former classroom teacher and current senior research fellow at the Australian Catholic University's Institute for Learning Sciences & Teacher Education:

... what's happened more recently is that data scientists and data analytics professionals have become a very large voice in how we determine what counts in education, how we measure it, how we account for it. ... So you have this cradle-to-grave cycle of how teachers are shaped within the systems that, again, are controlled by fewer and fewer voices around what counts as good.

... I was a teacher; I advocate for teacher well-being; I advocate for good conditions for teachers and teaching. But I think that in the defence of teacher professionalism, as all this is happening, there is a tendency for the teaching profession, as well as academics who study teachers, to say, "Just let teachers decide; teachers need more trust. We need more teacher

For the full interview with Jessica and fellow interlocutor Verónica Cabezas, see [Chapter 2](#).

For an example of Jessica's research on this topic, see Holloway, J., & Brass, J. (2018). Making accountable teachers: The terrors and pleasures of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 33(3), 361–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2017.1372636>.

autonomy, more discretion.” I see the advantages of that, and I do believe that autonomy and local decision-making is probably best for students.

But in making these arguments, sometimes we miss the historical look at schools and the observation about equity ... We say that teachers need more autonomy, teachers need more discretion. But that autonomy and that discretion wasn't good for a lot of students for a long time.

Jessica's remarks illustrate both the perils of overly centralised control (with “what counts as good” in the teaching profession being shaped by a few powerful voices) and the risks of unrestricted autonomy (when an absence of *standards* can yield damaging results if *selves*, *situations*, and *society* are aligned toward inequitable outcomes for children).

However, as Jessica's observations suggest, the relationship between teacher autonomy and systemwide control (or individual accountability and collective alignment) is much more nuanced than a straightforward trade-off. For one thing, there are many different conceptions of “autonomy”. Some draw a distinction between “freedom from” external constraints and “freedom to” act in various ways.

Perhaps more pertinent to teacher norms and a professional sense of purpose is the perspective advanced by some psychologists that conceptualises autonomy as assent. Motivation psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci argue that:

We know of no real-world circumstances in which people's behavior is totally independent of external influences, but, even if there were, that is not the critical issue in whether the people's behavior is autonomous. Autonomy refers to the extent to which people authentically or genuinely concur with the forces that do influence their behaviour. The issue is whether they are pawns (deCharms, 1968) to those forces, or, alternatively, perceive the forces as being valuable, helpful, and congruent sources of information that support their initiative. ... even the stability of a collective depends on people being relatively willing to adhere to its norms, practices, and values; and the health and performance of the participants involved depend on their experience of autonomy or volition in that adherence. (p. 330, emphasis original)

This conception of autonomy as authentic agreement with the forces that shape our choices and actions may open possibilities for balancing teachers' agency and systemwide goals, as I discuss below.

Another construction of autonomy that emerged in the interviews is that education policies may sometimes be articulated using the language of autonomy because this language carries positive connotations. Interlocutor Lucy Crehan described “**cases where you have very high-level and non-specific curricula that leave most of the decisions about what content is taught to the teachers**”, even though “**many teachers find this overwhelming**” because of the complexity of deciding what to

This freedom from/freedom to distinction is sometimes linked to Isaiah Berlin's positive liberty/negative liberty framing, and to Amartya Sen's capability approach (“freedom to”) to human welfare. Berlin, I. (1969). *Four essays on liberty*. Oxford University Press. Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). The Darker and Brighter Sides of Human Existence: Basic Psychological Needs as a Unifying Concept. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 319–338. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_03. For some related (but much more complex) arguments in philosophy, see Dworkin, G. (1988). *The theory and practice of autonomy*. University Press.

See [Chapter 6](#).

teach when, and to whom. As Lucy observed, “[T]eacher autonomy sounds good. But what they call teacher autonomy actually is responsibility ... without necessarily providing the support required for [teachers] to make the best decisions.”

This interplay between autonomy, responsibility, and support was also evident in reflections about ineffective education systems from interlocutor Luis Crouch, senior economist at RTI’s International Development Group and member of the RISE Research Directorate:

... because there is an issue of mutual accountability, and both sides of the relationship are broken, then there is a very serious chicken-and-egg problem of, “Where do you start?” The implicit belief of many development agencies seems to be that you can start by having those standards that teachers have to adhere to; especially if they’re outcome standards ... But the teachers don’t know the techniques for doing that in a way that’s clearly and self-evidently effective ... and the government doesn’t support them in acquiring those techniques. And if you’re put into the situation where you have to produce, but you don’t know how and the system has never trained you to do so, then you begin to absorb the sense that the whole thing is a bit of a game. So the whole relationship, and the mutuality of that relationship, becomes devalued.

I think the answer is that you can’t start only by demanding accountability for standards. You have to strengthen both sides at the same time. Typically, that hasn’t been done in the reform efforts of the past 20 or 25 years or so—until the emphasis on actually having skills, particularly in foundational learning, has come in more recently. And that is a hopeful thing, because it’s finally begun to spread the awareness that if you do support the teachers and give them the skills that they need, then the kids will learn, and it can create a kind of rebirth of the mutuality of that accountability.

Luis’ remarks make clear that professional agency can be compatible with systemwide structures of accountability and control—and also that most teachers are unlikely to enjoy any meaningful sense of professional agency in the absence of appropriate and applicable support for meeting educational goals. Similarly, Robert Wagner (1989) notes that when “the form of accounting selected, is beyond an agent’s ability to satisfy it, it is obvious that ... probability of compliance will be negligible, however willing the agent might happen to be” (p. 142).

In what remains of this section, I explore two sets of possibilities for strengthening purpose-driven teacher norms that may emerge at the intersection of autonomy, control for/alignment with systemwide educational goals, and support for achieving those goals.

For the full interview with Luis and fellow interlocutor Kwame Akyeampong, see [Chapter 12](#).

For Luis’ account of successful reform in three education systems that, among other things, balanced support and accountability, see Crouch, L. (2020). *Systems Implications for Core Instructional Support Lessons from Sobral (Brazil), Puebla (Mexico), and Kenya*. RISE Insight Series. 2020/020. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-RI_2020/020.

Wagner, R. B. (1989). *Accountability in education: A philosophical inquiry*. Routledge.

... yet well-designed supports can empower teachers in their classrooms while serving collective pedagogical goals ...

To begin at the classroom level, well-designed pedagogical supports can concurrently enable individual teachers to pursue an increasing range of their chosen educational goals in increasingly successful ways, while also building toward increasing alignment with systemwide goals for children’s wellbeing and development.

For a support structure to be “well-designed”, it must be appropriate for its context—and, in many classrooms, key contextual features include the fact that teachers practice their craft under stressful, repetitive, time-pressured, and performance-pressured conditions. As interlocutor Mike Hobbiss, a classroom teacher and cognitive neuroscience researcher, observed, these conditions mean that teachers frequently act in habitual rather than deliberate, goal-oriented ways:

... there are separate neural circuits which govern goal-directed behaviour and habitual behaviour. Goal-directed behaviour is non-habitual behaviour that we do because we want to achieve a certain outcome. In contrast, habitual behaviour is outcome-insensitive; we do it in response to the stimulus rather than to the consequence of the behaviour, and we just perform it automatically. ...

Because this is outcome-insensitive, the behaviour is performed regardless of your intention to change and even regardless of the negative things that happened the last time you shouted at a student or whatever it is. ... And yet the dominant model of trying to change teacher behaviour is assuming that they’re motivated to want to change, providing them with information, and then assuming that this will be enough. ...

However, coaching, which has become very popular in the last few years, is one of the approaches that does incorporate a behavioural aspect. ... So: providing the chance for people to practice whatever the behaviour is in as a realistic environment as possible; doing it numerous times, ideally under a bit of pressure, maybe with someone watching you—in other words, to replace an old behaviour by forming a new habit in exactly the way that you would form a habit otherwise.

Mike’s remarks make clear that coaching can be a powerful means of changing pedagogical norms. To extrapolate in a different direction, one interpretation of what Mike said is that teacher practice under typical, stressful circumstances may be a limited expression of teacher agency because multiple factors are prompting teachers toward repeating habitual actions rather than making intentional, professional, purpose-driven choices. Under such circumstances, intervening (whether via coaching or another approach) may actually, if counterintuitively, create more space for teachers to autonomously exercise their agency.

For the full interview with Mike and fellow interlocutor Alice Cornish, see [Chapter 14](#).

For Mike’s paper on habitual and goal-directed behaviour among teachers, see Hobbiss, M., Sims, S., & Allen, R. (2021). Habit formation limits growth in teacher effectiveness: A review of converging evidence from neuroscience and social science. *Review of Education*, 9(1), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3226>.

Another perhaps counterintuitive characteristic of well-designed, empowering pedagogical supports is specificity. Reflecting on Mike’s observations, fellow interlocutor Alice Cornish, a director at education consultancy Better Purpose and former classroom teacher, responded:

One thing I’m hearing there is that with instructional coaching and other professional development models, in order to tap into that understanding of habit building, it’s so critical to be very granular about what we mean by what good instruction looks like. So often, professional development is just not granular in any way. Instead, it’s so abstract. And the contrast really stands out from just listening to you speaking about coaching and thinking about some of the instructional coaching models that I’ve seen recently. There was a model that I was looking at in England—a high-income context, where teaching is graduate profession, et cetera—and the coaching feedback was so granular, with a breaking down of instructional approaches into actions that were so, so specific. And I think often in low- and middle-income contexts, we’re very far from that.

Such an emphasis on specific rather than open-ended feedback as a means of building teachers’ pedagogical capabilities suggests, again, that we would do well to move beyond a narrow understanding of teacher autonomy as an absence of external constraints.

A further illustration of how paying attention to meaningful pedagogical supports might imply an “authentic assent” definition of teacher autonomy (rather than a “freedom from” definition) came from interlocutor Maria Teresa Tatto, Southwest Borderlands Professor of Comparative Education at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College and director of the Global Education Program at Arizona State University, in her description of the “quality teaching rounds” approach:

Actually, the example of in-service teacher development in Australia that I mentioned earlier relates to this kind of iterative process with improvement, trust, and support at the school level. I attended one of the workshops that Jennifer Gore does with teachers. The teachers in the school all have to come together and they have to be willing to contribute. Each teacher is recorded in a lesson—they can choose what they want to teach, depending on what challenges they might be having—and then they do a series of conversations to provide productive feedback on the lesson. And then it goes around to all of the other teachers in the group. It’s like a combination of lesson study and a commitment-based intervention in the school that can change the norms of “how we do things here”. Overall, this model has been very, very successful. She has done randomised control trials that can show the enormous success of this in-service approach, not only on lesson quality and the trusting relationships within the school, but also on how the students benefit.

For the full interview with Alice and fellow interlocutor Mike Hobbiss, see [Chapter 14](#).

For a report by Alice and her colleagues on applying behavioural science to teaching, see Better Purpose. (2022). *Improving the teaching of FLN: Insights from behavioral sciences*. Synthesis Report. <https://www.betterpurpose.co/behavioral-sciences>.

For the full interview with Maria Teresa and fellow interlocutor David Evans, see [Chapter 11](#).

For more on Jennifer Gore’s work on Quality Teaching Rounds, see <https://qtacademy.edu.au/what-is-qtr/>. For an example of Maria Teresa’s research on teachers and teaching, see Tatto, M. T., Rodriguez, M. C., Reckase, M. D., Smith, W. M., Bankov, K., & Pippin, J. (2020). *The First Five Years of Teaching Mathematics (FIRSTMATH): Concepts, Methods and Strategies for Comparative International Research*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-44047-3_1.

Under a “freedom from” definition of teacher autonomy, these quality teaching rounds could appear to be autonomy-reducing, given that these rounds may result in greater conformity of an individual teacher’s preferences to dominant group preferences. However, under an “authentic assent” definition, quality teaching rounds would appear to be autonomy-enhancing, given that they allow teachers to choose the lesson for which they would like feedback. Moreover, the fact that this approach can improve both “lesson quality” and “the trusting relationships within the school” suggests a further dimension of teacher autonomy to consider: not only individual autonomy, but also collective agency.

... and well-designed policies can create space for individual and collective teacher agency

Besides classroom- and school-level instructional supports that can contribute to both teachers’ capabilities and collective goals, another set of possibilities for concurrently reinforcing individual autonomy and systemwide alignment relates to broader policy changes. Specifically, certain education policies can either expand or constrict the space available for teachers to exercise their agency individually and collectively.

For example, Barbara Tournier, a programme specialist at UNESCO’s International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), observed that collegial collaboration—which is widely regarded as a marker of professional agency—is much more likely to become a dominant norm among teachers when it is demarcated in official expectations (*standards*) and time allocations (*situations*):

In practice, from our standpoint, if you want to encourage collaboration and peer learning, you’ve also got to formalise it—and that means, very practically, releasing some time from the teachers’ timetables so that they can spend it on collaboration and on opening up their classroom to other teachers. It’s about taking those steps and changing the job description. If the job description says that they’re responsible for opening their classroom, sharing practices with colleagues, and attending other colleagues’ lessons, then that will slowly make these practices normal. But if you don’t make room for collaborative practices, then there’s no guarantee that they will really be taken on.

Apart from policies related to specific practices, broader policies pertaining to the teaching profession or to school organisation can also preserve—or quash—norms of autonomous teacher action and collaboration. As observed by interlocutor Soufia Anis Siddiqi, assistant professor at the School of Education of the Lahore University of Management Sciences, these policies and the resulting norms can vary vastly, even within the same country, as she experienced during fieldwork in two Pakistani provinces:

For the full interview with Barbara and fellow interlocutor Juliet Wajega, see [Chapter 13](#).

For an example of Barbara’s research on teachers, see Tournier, B., & Chimier, C. (2019). *Teacher career reforms: Learning from experience*. IIEP-UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000372505>.

The distinction is that the teachers in Punjab are more likely to complain, more likely to be disgruntled and frustrated. ... And this is a hypothesis, and it's worth testing at some point, but I think this ethic might have come out in the aftermath of the Punjab Education Roadmap, which was very, very high-stakes accountability that teachers really struggled with. ... Often, they were being held accountable through metrics that were not designed for teachers, like on infrastructural metrics, and on some level of student performance when assessments had not even been reformed enough to really demonstrate any kind of learning or teacher performance. But the stakes were high in the sense that you could be penalised so you would lose money from your salary; or you would be transferred out of your village or district immediately without any further investigation. What that might have done to the system, over the course of time, is to allow teachers to internalise a really negative sense of self. ...

KP has had a very different experience. They did not follow that level of high-stakes accountability, even though they did develop a set of metrics. And they currently still do not hold teachers to account on the basis of infrastructural metrics, or even student performance. And so it's a double-edged sword. It's a bad thing because it's very hard to determine where the system is in terms of learning performance. But, in a sense, it's been a good thing because it's still left—in my opinion, based on my fieldwork—room for teachers to respond well to any attempts from the system to change the quality of teacher training, or anything related to it or stemming from it.

Similar to Jessica's observations above, Soufia's remarks also indicate that autonomy without adequate accountability or support may come at the cost of systemwide goals.

One way of moving beyond this trade-off again entails looking at autonomy not only as “freedom from” but also as “authentic assent”. In discussing a research project on professional teaching standards across contexts, Carlos Vargas Tamez, head of the secretariat of the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 and chief of UNESCO's Section for Teacher Development, noted that:

It is also very important to think about the practical dimension of these standards—how they are challenged, defined, refined in practice. These standards are meaningful only once they are put into practice, only once they are reflected upon by teachers themselves, such that they need to be revamped, redone, reconsidered. So, to me, any professional teacher standards are basically a live document, which captures that consensus. First of all, it captures a consensus of what we expect teachers to be able to do. But it should be about what teachers expect to be and do *themselves*. And this changes in time, and this changes in context. That's why I say it has to be a live document of aspirations and expectations—and one that needs to be fed back with and through teacher practice.

For the full interview with Soufia and fellow interlocutor Yamini Aiyar, see [Chapter 8](#).

For an example of Soufia's research on teachers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, see Siddiqi, S. (2022). Contested Identities; Competing Accountabilities: The Making of a 'Good' Public Schoolteacher in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Political Economy Paper. <https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-2022/PE02>.

For the full interview with Carlos and fellow interlocutor Laura Savage, see [Chapter 15](#).

For a glimpse into some of Carlos' recent work at the Teacher Task Force, see <https://teachertaskforce.org/blog/teacher-innovation-key-resilient-education-systems-lessons-2021-policy-dialogue-forum>.

In emphasising that teacher professional standards should be based on consensus and teachers' own, evolving expectations and experiences, Carlos' conception of professional teacher standards holds in tension the twin goals of systemwide alignment and teacher agency. In most education systems today, such teacher standards may be lofty aspirations rather than concrete realities. Yet without aspirations, ideals, and goals, there would be no possibilities for revitalising professional norms among teachers in settings where overwhelming pressures have hampered the pursuit of shared purposes.

Toward a professional norm of professing a shared purpose?

By discussing the themes of purpose, pressures and possibilities, I have offered in this chapter not a comprehensive overview but rather a taster of the rich interviews about teacher norms in this asynchronous symposium, to say nothing of the further delights of the discussant-style essays that conclude the volume. The goal in this introductory chapter—and in this volume more generally—is to further the conversation about teacher norms in the Global South, not to have the last word.

To wrap up my contribution to this conversation: although this asynchronous symposium focuses on teacher professional norms, I have not broached the (thorny) question of what it means for teaching to be a profession. While this isn't the place to explore all the academic debates on this question, here is one perspective from James W. Stigler and James Hiebert's *The Teaching Gap*:

There are many ideas about how to turn teachers into high-status professionals: increased pay, increased certification requirements, more accountability, career ladders, peer review, training teachers as researchers, and encouraging teachers themselves to set the standards for entrance into their profession. Not all of these stratagems are proposed by teachers' advocates, but they do have one thing in common: They presume that attributing to teachers the characteristics common to professionals in other fields will bring higher status and respect. We believe, however, that attacking the problem simply by arbitrarily assigning professional characteristics to teachers mistakes the trappings for the profession. In fact, a profession is created not by certificates and censures but by the existence of a substantive body of professional knowledge, as well as a mechanism for improving it, and by the genuine desire of the profession's members to improve their practice. ...

Perhaps it is ironic that professional status for teachers will come only when the focus shifts away from teachers and onto teaching. But that is what is required. When teachers have a way to act on their desire to improve, when they can point to increases in students' learning over time, and when they can

For more on the professional status of teaching, see, for example, Ingersoll, R., & Collins, G. J. (2018). The Status of Teaching as a Profession. *Schools and Society: A Sociological Approach to Education (6th Edition)*, 199-213. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/221; and Etzioni, A. (1969). *The semi-professions and their organization: teachers, nurses, social workers*. Free Press.

disseminate into standard practice the improvements in teaching that are responsible, teaching will be on its way to becoming a true profession. And when teaching becomes a profession, teachers will inherit the professional badges that come from being members. (pp. 115, 119)

Or, put differently: perhaps we should work toward a future where the teaching *profession* is defined by a norm of *professing* a shared sense of purpose, a shared desire to cultivate children’s capabilities.

Many of the teacher norms described in this volume are far from this vision of professionalism. But this is not the end of the story. In the words of Dan Honig, associate professor of public policy at University College London:

... even as we see norms that push bureaucrats, that push public servants, that push teachers in the direction of doing less and caring less, we also see lots and lots of examples of “deviants”—I’m doing air quotes now—of “deviants” who still care. Who, to use your way of framing that, Sharath, know in their heart of hearts what they should do. So that can’t be about the system’s logic. It has to be about their own logic, because the system is pushing them away from it. My view of the world is that most civil servants are good, and most teachers are good, because most people are good. And most people want their lives to have purpose and meaning, and to feel themselves to have done good things in the world. So we have a system that has been able to cope with an attempt to create norms which are, in my view, largely destructive, because of the inherent goodness of the people who populate the system. And that, to me, is incredible reason for hope.

Here’s to teachers, to students—and to clear-sighted, pragmatic, locally embedded hope.

Stigler, J. W., & Hiebert, J. (1999). *The teaching gap: Best ideas from the world’s teachers for improving education in the classroom*. The Free Press.

For the full interview between Dan and fellow interlocutor Sharath Jeevan, see [Chapter 4](#).

For an example of Dan’s work on mission-driven bureaucrats (which he is currently developing into a book project), see Honig, D. (2022). *Managing for Motivation as Public Performance Improvement Strategy in Education & Far Beyond* (CID Faculty Working Paper No. 409). Center for International Development at Harvard University. <https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/publications/managing-motivation-public-performance-improvement-strategy-education-far-beyond>.

CHAPTER 2

On autonomy, equity, democracy, and building a granular understanding of teachers' experiences

Verónica Cabezas & Jessica Holloway

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This conversation took place on 6 October 2021.

YUE-YI

So, the first question is: can you tell us about a story, an experience, or an incident that illustrates how norms can affect behaviour and practice in ways that rules or economic models or standard assumptions just might not predict? It can be a real

or anecdotal thing, or it can be a movie you've watched, or just any illustration that comes to mind.

VERÓNICA

We have a teaching career law here in Chile. And it doesn't include the school principals; it's only until the advanced teaching level. For example, right now principals have a lower salary than the super teachers in Chile because they're not part of these teaching careers. I'm just talking about salaries, okay? So right now, some super teachers are really not looking forward to becoming principals because they'd have these lower salaries, and they lose, in fact, some of the benefits that they already get. I don't know if it's a norm—it's more like an economic model of the teaching career law that was not thought through in advance. That's one thing.

Another thing that I'm thinking about is teaching distributions in the system, which I analyse. So one thing that has really caught my attention is how we can better redistribute the teachers—you know, so teachers with better preparation are in schools that have lower socioeconomic levels. And that's not happening, across the whole world.

But it's not only about salaries. We can increase teacher salaries in schools in poor communities by, I don't know, 20 percent, 30 percent—and I'm not sure if that would really change how teachers are distributed. Because it's also about social norms. It's about the culture. It's about where they feel comfortable working. It's about social networks, et cetera, et cetera. So, that's really hard, because in the end you see that it's not about a specific policy, no? It's about how we can change the whole organisation to have a school system that can attract and retain good teachers. So those are my first two thoughts for that question.

JESSICA

I can build on that, because so many important points were raised there. I think one of the most persistent norms within the discourse around teachers and teaching is that we look to teachers to solve a lot of problems that are actual problems of society. And this norm is also visible when it comes to the particular problem of the distribution of teachers.

It is so true that the students who come from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and have it harder in every other circumstance are typically the ones who get the newest teachers with the least amount of experience, or teachers who are using it as a stepping stone to go on to their next career level or whatnot. And so we want to come up with policies for teachers to go to these harder-to-staff schools.

See also Section 2.1, “The teaching profession is complex: Exploring teacher motivation, teacher career dynamics, and education bureaucracies”, in Hwa, Y.-Y., & Pritchett, L. (2021). *Teacher Careers in Education Systems That Are Coherent for Learning: Choose and Curate Toward Commitment to Capable and Committed Teachers (5Cs)*. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE). https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-Misc_2021/02

But if we think about it from a different perspective—take the US, for example, where schools are more segregated *right now* than they've ever been in history, more segregated than back when segregation was legal. So, to me, that's a societal problem. And some of the emphasis, in my view, should be placed more on: what is it that governments are doing, and what is society doing, that's creating this segregation? There are other policies in place—whether it's around housing, or economics, or so many other facets of society—that produce these problems as well. But then it's teachers who become the site of intervention and the ones that we need to then put in the position to solve the problems. And it just it never works, from what we've seen.

YUE-YI

Actually, yesterday, at one of the World Teachers' Day events, there was a teacher who said, "You know, the teacher-as-superhero narrative, it's well meaning, but it's actually quite destructive, because these larger equity issues are societal problems, not purely teacher problems. And the superhero narrative also places way too heavy a burden on some teachers."

JESSICA

That's right, and that was actually going to be the story that I brought up. I don't have a specific anecdote or a particular story, but it's the fact that we have this discourse that says that teaching is a profession of passion. And so people go into teaching because they're passionate about it, because they love it, because they want to help children.

A lot of these things are true—these are the reasons I went into teaching—but I think when we perpetuate that narrative, then it puts teachers in a position where oftentimes they're willing to accept conditions that aren't necessarily the best conditions for what others in other professions would necessarily deal with. Again, this is so different across different countries and whatnot, so speaking universally like this is challenging. But I do think that we see this often across countries. And it's such a problematic discourse, I think, and a norm that we've established in society across a lot of different countries.

Paying attention to the micro level and looking below the surface

YUE-YI

Just to flag, we're well into the "*what*" of our conversation—so talking about the most influential norms that shape teacher practice in the contexts you've worked in or studied. We've talked about some professional norms and some social ones, but feel free to also throw in the organisational or bureaucratic norms you can think of. Also,

we can start to explore how we define which norms are good and which are, quote unquote, bad.

VERÓNICA

Well, this is a really big question. We could talk about this for, I don't know, a year. But I think it's important to understand the micro-level norms and the macro-level norms. This is not based on a theoretical piece that I have read anywhere, but what I mean is that there are so many norms inside of the school that sometimes are almost invisible. The school principal sets the norms—for example, maybe to motivate collaboration, or for more empowerment of teachers. Or they can discuss the vision, like what are the goals for students—maybe introducing a vision where socioemotional skills are equally important compared to the academic piece. So what I'm trying to say is that the school norms at the micro level are so, so important. For example, for attracting and retaining teachers, the macro policies like salaries can be important. But, in the end, what's happening inside of schools can be much more important.

One thing that's very important is, of course, leadership and relationships within teams in schools—Jessica, maybe you have studied that. For example, what's happening in our schools around how they use their non-teaching hours? Are they collaborating? Are they working in teams? Are they working alone? How is the physical space for doing that—are they working alone in an isolated space, or do they really have a space where they can connect and speak about professional things? Are they sharing instructional materials and planning lessons together? So, there are a lot of norms in the schools at the micro level that I would say that are important to look at.

JESSICA

Really great points. And I've got two points I want to raise. One is more connected to what Verónica just said, so I'll start there. And then the other one's going to take a little bit of a sideways turn, but it's something I've been thinking a lot about lately, and I wanted to propose it here and maybe tease it out with the two of you a little bit.

About these micro norms that take shape in schools, I think it's a really, really important point. I'm thinking about what professional collaboration looks like, and the ways that we try to structure schools so that we can promote the sorts of things that we call professional practice. We want teachers working together, we want them to have professional autonomy, professional discretion, these sorts of things, right? And collaboration at the heart of that. But what I'm finding in Australia in particular—and I've seen this in other cases in the US and the UK as well, but I'll talk about the Australian case right now because I find it really interesting. A lot of times in the US people will say, you know, teachers have really been deprofessionalised and standardised, but the teaching profession in Australia is typically held up as being considered more professional.

For more on the importance of understanding teachers' daily experiences and circumstances, see remarks from interlocutor Kwame Akyeampong in [Chapter 12](#).

But what I found in my research just over the past couple of years here is that because of the rapid increase in requirements—particularly around accountability in terms of collecting data, reporting data, analysing data, and using data, as well as national policies around teacher professional standards and curriculum mandates—and what has happened at the school level, because of these big policies and these big discourses around what teachers should do, is that teachers spend hours of their day actually doing team collaboration. But the way that that takes shape now is that they’ve got to split work up because there is so much to do that one person can’t physically do it on their own. So this looks like collaboration on a surface level; but when you get in there and you talk to people about what they’re doing, it’s not professional collaboration in the way that the literature frames it. It is, “We have to get through all of this by Friday; so you do this, you do that, and you do this; then we come together, we share and then we finish it.” You end up having this very standardised way of teaching these lessons associated with this national curriculum through this perverted form of collaboration. I find that tension really fascinating.

And I think that this is becoming more common, at least in the different contexts that I’ve studied, because of the demands coming from the accountability requirements. So you have things like distributed leadership; I’ve written a bit about that. And now it’s like all of these things that we have always held up as markers of professionalism and markers of good teaching have been perverted, because these conditions have produced these particular ways of doing collaboration and particular ways of doing distributed leadership. So that’s the critical scholar in me—and I don’t mean to just criticise everything, but I think it’s important to think about those things. So that’s my thought, and I’ll save the sideways note for a minute later.

The curricular straitjacket

VERÓNICA

It’s really, really interesting, what you’re saying. Because maybe we’re getting there in the future. But in terms of where we are now, we’re always looking at public policy in the US and UK and Australia. But one thing that we have in Chile—and in many other countries, I would guess—is that teachers do not really collaborate during school hours. They don’t distribute the work. And Chile is also one of the most competitive countries, in terms of teaching, right? Because performance-based pay has been present in Chile for quite a while, with value-added models and teaching evaluations and that whole sort of thing. And we have the new teaching career law from 2016.

Right now, we have had the new teacher standards since, I don’t know, one month ago. And the new teacher standards are, amazingly, based a lot on the Australian case, in fact.

For some of Jessica’s research on distributed leadership, see Chapter 9, “Distributing Leadership: Sharing Responsibility and Maintaining Accountability” in Holloway, J. (2021). *Metrics, Standards and Alignment in Teacher Policy: Critiquing Fundamentalism and Imagining Pluralism*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4814-1_9; and Holloway, J., Nielsen, A., & Saltmarsh, S. (2018). Prescribed distributed leadership in the era of accountability: The experiences of mentor teachers. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 46(4), 538–555. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143216688469>

For more on value-added models, see interlocutor Maria Teresa Tatto’s remarks in Chapter 11. For a randomised-control trial of teacher performance pay based on a within-school ranking of subjective teacher evaluations by line managers compared to pay based on a within-school ranking of teacher value-added, see Andrabi, T. & Brown, C. (2022). Subjective versus Objective Incentives and Teacher Productivity. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/092. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/092.

JESSICA

I'd believe it.

VERÓNICA

The standards are related to training teachers, leading to a stage at the end where they are like teacher superstars. So that's good, you know, because having these different stages of teaching means that we have advanced in our teacher career policy. But if we look at the teacher in the school, what is their role? And what is the routine of a teacher during school hours? They work a lot of extra hours after school because they still don't know how to use their non-teaching hours during school in a good way. I'm saying this in a very aggregate way, because not this is not true in all schools—but teachers are not empowered. They don't have this professional discourse to make decisions to, for example, have flexibility in the curriculum. You know, one issue that has emerged in the public policy and the discourse here in Chile from this *pandemia* is the prioritisation of the curriculum. Because our curriculum is too extensive, so teachers don't have the time to cover the whole curriculum.

JESSICA

It's exactly the same in Australia. Exactly the same.

VERÓNICA

They don't have time to stop and take decisions to say, "You know, we're going to stop our project here, and make this knowledge more profound; maybe I'm going to complement it with another discipline; and I'm going to prioritise this way," and whatever. The curriculum is running their daily life. There's no, "That's okay, you didn't understand this topic but we will continue tomorrow." Because the academic leader is looking at the teachers: "Did you cover this? Okay, check. Did you cover this? Okay."

So being a good teacher here in Chile is still a lot about whether they cover the curriculum. It's not about the quality of what they covered. It's about whether they wrote the title on the board, and if they covered the right pages of the book, and if the children have written in their notebooks what they have to cover. The curriculum is so large that it's like a *camisa de fuerza*, you know, this shirt that they put on people.

For related observations on pressure from curricular expectations and assessments, see remarks from interlocutors Katlego Sengadi and Lucy Crehan in [Chapter 6](#) and from Maria Teresa Tatto in [Chapter 11](#).

YUE-YI

Ah, it's like a straitjacket.

VERÓNICA

So it's really important, even though it's not so—how do you say—it's not so sexy. Changing the curriculum takes very long discussions, for years and years. It's very

political, you know: if you take something from the curriculum, there may be a lot of academics who are going to end up without work because you don't need their content anymore. So there's a lot of politics behind that. It's not about what children need. That's my opinion, at least.

I think maybe we need more flexibility in the curriculum, and more trust in teachers, especially right now. We have seen that the skills that children need are not always in the curriculum. Children know that, and teachers know that. So that's another point that I wanted to put in the discussion. I'm not a curriculum expert, I don't really understand too much about this, but I have heard about it a lot in the discourse of teachers.

JESSICA

I think you're exactly right. And I would say, every teacher I've ever talked to—regardless of the country—and every academic who studies the same topics would say exactly the same thing. But they have to cover too much. And in doing so, they end up going through the sequences of topics really quickly, because you have to get through it. Because somebody is going to check to make sure they got through it, and because the students are going to go on to the next year, and they've got to be able to show competency on the things that they've done the previous year, so that can start the new rat race the next year.

YUE-YI

This also intersects with some of the equity points and the political points you were making earlier, because in countries where lots of kids aren't learning, then the curriculum might suit the 1 to 5 percent of kids at the top whose parents are in policy decision-making roles. But it might not suit the rest of the kids—like in India, where some of the studies say that the average kid is two grade levels behind the curriculum. Yet, according to colleagues in Delhi, every semester teachers have to sign an affidavit saying that they finished the syllabus.

Anyway, that tangent aside, we were already kind of talking about this, but it would be great if we start bringing in some of the “why”—why and how norms emerge, and what causes some norms to be durable and stay in the system. And, Jessica, I also do want to hear your sideways point.

Balancing autonomy and equity, power and empathy

JESSICA

I can actually bring it up now because I think I can figure out a way to relate it so that it's not too "out there". But one of the things I was going to bring up was that it's about power as well, right? It's the politics of setting curriculum standards, setting teacher standards, all of these things, what goes in, what goes out—but it's also about power. In terms of how many people sit at that table, who is it that sits at the table when the decisions are being made. And there's always been this long debate about whether or not teachers have a voice within these decisions, and whether this positions them as being a profession or not—I don't want to wade too much into the professionalism debate because there's so much nuance there that gets glossed over when we try and do it too briefly.

But what I will say is that I think in this current moment, related to that "why", we've had these different disciplines and fields that have been able to have a very big say in what counts in education and how we shape what teaching should be. Economics, to be fair, is one of the bigger discourses that's been quite present in education since roughly the 70s, and then primarily in the 90s and 2000s. But what's happened more recently is that data scientists and data analytics professionals have become a very large voice in how we determine what counts in education, how we measure it, how we account for it. There's a lot of literature on like the datafication of education, the datafication of teaching, and I won't get into the theoretical bits. But it's built on those sorts of accountability infrastructures, and then moving those to the online space. And all of a sudden, you need a whole new suite of experts who are not, say, economists of education. They're not people who are involved in education—they're data analytics companies that are crunching numbers and reporting back to schools about how we decide what quality means, what teaching looks like. And that gets down into teacher education as well, because teachers need to learn how to use these new technologies, these new techniques, these new discourses, in order to be the kind of teachers that are required to be in school these days. So you have this cradle-to-grave cycle of how teachers are shaped within the systems that, again, are controlled by fewer and fewer voices around what counts as good.

A sideways point is that while this is happening, what I'm finding really interesting—and I'm going to say upfront I'm a huge advocate for teachers. I was a teacher; I advocate for teacher well-being; I advocate for good conditions for teachers and teaching. But I think that in the defence of teacher professionalism, as all this is happening, there is a tendency for the teaching profession, as well as academics who study teachers, to say, "Just let teachers decide; teachers need more trust. We need more teacher autonomy, more discretion." I see the advantages of that, and I do believe that autonomy and local decision-making is probably best for students.

For one overview, see Williamson, B. (2019). Datafication of Education: A Critical Approach to Emerging Analytics Technologies and Practices. In *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

For example, see Holloway, J., & Brass, J. (2018). Making accountable teachers: The terrors and pleasures of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 33(3), 361–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2017.1372636> and Holloway, J. (2019). Teacher evaluation as an onto-epistemic framework. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 40(2), 174–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2018.1514291>.

But in making these arguments, sometimes we miss the historical look at schools and the observation about equity—which has come up multiple times in this discussion already—that schools have not been equitable for all students for all time. And I think that in our debates around defending the profession, we have to be careful not to look backwards and overly romanticise what schools have been. We say that teachers need more autonomy, teachers need more discretion. But that autonomy and that discretion wasn't good for a lot of students for a long time. If you look at students of colour, look at students from more disadvantaged backgrounds: these students are more likely to be disciplined more harshly than their peers. They're more likely to suffer from things like expulsion and suspension, while others get a slap on the wrist. Discretion hasn't always been really good for democratic societies and for equity. So when we talk about this professionalism and norms, we also have to be careful that in our defence of teachers that we don't also say, "Yeah, we need to go back to how things were," because "how things were" was not all good. And when we get into the question of how we reorient, I hope this is a part of the conversation because I find it missing in a lot of the literature these days.

I know that was really long, but thank you for letting me have the time because it's something I'm trying to think about. I'll be quiet now.

YUE-YI

That also related to some things we've been thinking about at RISE: in education systems, you have so many levels of analysis and actors, you have a great deal of complexity. And so some kind of shared sense of purpose matters so much for alignment across the different levels of the system. But of course purpose is to some extent individual and intrinsic, and it can't and shouldn't be dictated. On the other hand, people at the centre of the education system have this bird's eye view that is often used in terrible over-standardised, seeing-like-a-state kinds of ways. But in an ideal world this bird's eye view could be used to look at the whole landscape, the distributional challenges, and say, "These are the principles that we collectively should pursue for the good of all children."

JESSICA

Especially when the planet's on fire! We're facing an environmental crisis, we need people to get vaccinated—there are all these big issues for which we do need to have a bird's eye view and go, "Okay, we all need to be working towards this." But then I'm so anti-standardisation. So it's one of my great fascinations and frustrations.

VERÓNICA

Thinking about what you were saying, Jessica, my mind as a researcher and as a practitioner is very divided, you know. Although I know that all these public policies, norms, et cetera, are so important—but I think we also have to move forward to specific actions in each school, in each leader, and between each leader and their community.

For more on teacher professionalism and autonomy, see remarks from interlocutors Maria Teresa Tatto and David Evans in [Chapter 11](#) and Barbara Tournier and Juliet Wajega in [Chapter 13](#).

Kaffenberger, M. (forthcoming). The role of "purpose" in education system outcomes: A conceptual framework and empirical examples. RISE Working Paper Series.

Scott, J. C. (2008). *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. Yale University Press.

For more on the relationship between standardisation and autonomy, see remarks from interlocutors Shwetlena Sabarwal and Joan DeJaeghere in [Chapter 3](#) and from interlocutors Lucy Crehan and Katlego Sengadi in [Chapter 6](#).

I was thinking about the word “empathy”. Jessica was a teacher. So she already has experienced what theory looks in practice, what the policies written on paper look like in daily life. What you think about in the morning when you get to school: maybe you’re nervous and you feel your stomach churn; maybe you’re happy, you’re sad, you’re frustrated. And then you get to your home, you’re tired, you can’t sleep. I have not experienced that because I have not been a teacher in school. But I think that we need the word “empathy”, to really understand not only the micro level, but even more profoundly, the experience of the teachers, since they get up in the morning until they go to bed.

You know, I also work with a lot with design thinking as a methodology in my innovation class; to interview users in a very profound way, observe them, shadow for a couple of days, et cetera. So what I’m trying to say is that public policies would be so different if we have more empathy in the sense of a scientific methodology. It’s not an empathy of just saying, “I understand you.” It’s really getting this information to people who are also taking decisions at all levels. So that’s the first thing that I have in my mind: we need to understand what’s happening in the micro-micro-micro level—and that’s so important for being able to make better decisions. For me, it’s really important that we include that in this interview.

I think one of the things that you said, Jessica, was about economics. And I would say the people that work in economics, or even the average person in academia, you know, they’re not really connected to what’s happening in schools.

For more on teacher voice and empathy for teachers’ perspectives, see the conversation between interlocutors Juliet Wajega and Barbara Tournier in [Chapter 13](#).

JESSICA

It’s so bad. So bad.

VERÓNICA

I agree.

JESSICA

I was doing an interview just about three weeks ago, for a completely different project. I’m talking to new teachers. And this woman goes, “You know, I’ve been talking to all of my friends who are going through teacher education now, and they’re like, ‘Those people, those universities, they’re just clueless. They don’t have a clue what’s going on in classrooms these days.’” And I was looking at her and thinking, you’re right. I’ve been out of the classroom for 10 years, which to me feels like yesterday, like it feels like I was just there. But a classroom today and what teachers are asked to do today, compared to what I had to do, is a completely different universe. And here we are, where we’re writing the books, we’re doing the research, we’re having these conversations.

YUE-YI

My favourite story about this, when I was doing the postgrad diploma in education during my time with Teach For Malaysia, is that our classroom management lecturer, he makes this big deal about how, on the dot when the class is supposed to start, he goes up to the lecture room door, and he locks it. He's like, "You need to enforce standards. So you lock the doors so if kids are late, they can't get in." And then we were sitting there thinking, "Well, most of our classrooms don't have lockable doors, and some of them have missing windowpanes." My kids would come and go through the windows when they were being naughty during lessons.

Anyway, since we are on the "how" of how to reorient norms, Verónica, if you could talk a bit about the things that Elige Educar does—your work with secondary students, your media advocacy.

Improving recruitment to, and social validation of, the teaching profession

VERÓNICA

Well, Elige Educar has existed for around 12 years. We have three big objectives. One is to increase the social value of the teaching profession in the whole country. The second one is to attract better candidates to the teaching profession—and I know as Jessica is listening, she's already thinking about all the research. And the third objective is to improve the teaching conditions that you have inside schools.

For the first piece, about the social value of the teaching profession, we have done a few different things. We are part of the Global Teacher Prize with the Varkey Foundation. I was part of the group of people that selected the best teacher for this year—but it's really important how we position this, you know. It's not about really the best teacher. It's about showing what teachers are doing inside schools, with the children in their daily school lives, and positioning that in the media because people don't really know how teachers are changing lives of students. We have teachers from all around Chile—Chile is very long, you know—so from the Altiplano to the really, really southern parts, and what they are doing is really amazing. With a lot of professional capacities, taking a lot of pedagogical decisions and changing the lives of their students. So we have also done a lot of campaigns. Right now we're doing social media campaigns.

And for the second piece—I think that's the most important piece—for attracting better candidates, what we do is that we work with the students in their last year of high school. We do a lot of collaboration with the government, so when students register for their exit exam from high school to enter university, we ask them, "Are you interested in a teaching career?" And, "Are you interested in receiving support from Elige Educar?" Some say yes, so maybe around half of the high school students

See <https://eligeeducar.cl/> (in Spanish); and Bassi, M., & Covacevich, C. (2012, July). How can we bring the best talent to the classroom? Preliminary results of Elige Educar. Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Briefly Noted Series, No. 19. <https://publications.iadb.org/publications/english/document/Briefly-Noted-No-19-July-2012-How-Can-We-Bring-the-Best-Talent-to-the-Classroom-Preliminary-Results-of-Elige-Educar.pdf>

See <https://www.globalteacherprize.org/>.

For an example of a media campaign commissioned by Elige Educar, see <https://www.adotheworld.com/campaigns/what-is-it-to-be-a-teacher-today> (in Spanish with English subtitles).

around the country are receiving our support. Last year we did a study with them that is already published—I can send it to you, Jessica.

JESSICA

That would be great.

VERÓNICA

We analyse intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the messages that we send to them, because we send messages, WhatsApps, emails. So we either tell them more about the vocation, “Oh, you change lives being a teacher,” et cetera, or more about the extrinsic benefits, “You’re going to get this salary, you’re going to get these benefits.” And of course we’re trying to understand what makes this new generation feel moved. We also do mentoring for these final-year high school students where they receive a call and speak with somebody that is already studying to be a teacher, and they ask them about the classes, about the benefits, or about the practical parts. Right now we’re doing an experiment about this mentoring piece, compared to having a bot sending messages with a computer.

And why we do this is not because we really want to go through experimental studies—we’re not really interested in that. But it’s because we’re investing a lot of money and time and we really need to attract more people to a teaching career. Right now. Because, well, Elige Educar has played an important role in putting on the agenda—we have had I don’t know how many first-page articles in the newspapers, and it’s a topic they’re discussing right now in the presidential campaigns: there is predicted a scarcity of teachers for the next 5, 10 years.

This is a very common problem because we increased the requirements to enter our teaching program. That’s a long story, but earlier it was a very, very easy to be a teacher. You could receive a degree over the internet. But now only the highest 30 percent of high school students in what is like their SAT exam, or in our case the PSU, can enter the teaching career. And universities are very demanding about the requirements to be able to get a teaching degree. So this is a very huge problem, but we say it’s a happy problem, because it’s an amazing that we have improved so much. But what’s also happening—which is related to what Jessica said at the beginning, that there are all these social problems that are not about the teaching profession—is that, for example, in the north and the south of the country, students have lower scores on the exit exam than in the centre. So we have predicted a high teacher scarcity in the north and the south of the country. And Elige Educar has played a really important role in putting this topic on the agenda, but right now we’re working on how we can solve it, because we were also the organisation that promoted this increase in standards.

JESSICA

Right.

Ajzenman, N., Elacqua, G., Hincapié, D., Jaimovich, A., Boo, F. L., Paredes, D., & Román, A. (2021). Career choice motivation using behavioral strategies. *Economics of Education Review*, 84, 102173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2021.102173>.

Retention, exit, and re-entry in teacher career trajectories

VERÓNICA

So we're trying to understand, first of all, how we can attract candidates in a cost-effective way, because we don't have money to mentor each person in the country through phone calls. Of course, no country can do that; it's not a good public policy. Maybe it's a combination between phone calls and bots.

To end my story, because I can give a whole presentation about Elige Educar, the third piece is getting more attention to policies that can improve teaching conditions. The new teaching career law has some of this. For example, the government increased non-teaching hours. It was like 25 percent of teachers' working hours in the contract, and now it's increased to 35 percent.

But what's happening right now in Chile, as in many countries in the world especially in the US, is that teacher retention is still the more important piece. We are putting in so much effort to attract new teachers, but the retention is a huge, huge problem. So we're doing a lot of studies in Elige Educar—they're much shorter studies, and the goal of these studies is usually to inform our advocacy and to influence public policy, so we're not worried about publishing our results in journals—but in these studies our focus now is to try to understand the retention and the reincorporation of teachers that already left the teaching career and are coming back.

JESSICA

So many of my recent interviews have been teachers who have come back, and I thought that was so weird! I didn't know anybody who had done that before, but just all of a sudden, it seems to be common.

VERÓNICA

The research is very scarce around the world. We don't have those numbers of how many teachers reincorporate. We don't really have information about them. And I think we have to pay more attention to that.

JESSICA

And why it happens.

VERÓNICA

In the USA, there was a paper in a journal—I have it here somewhere around my papers—it's called "Former teachers: Exits and Re-entries" from *Educational Policy* in

2021. And I'm going to write the authors in the Zoom chat—but the number is that 38 percent of new teachers every year are actually those that have left their teaching career in the past and are coming back.

YUE-YI

Wow.

JESSICA

That is wild! Because we always talk about 50 percent leaving after five years, but we don't say that half of them come back.

VERÓNICA

Yes, most teachers are only away from teaching for a short time; between 25 and 33 percent of teachers who leave return within five years. I'm doing work about teaching trajectories, and I think we have not really understood the flexibility of the teaching trajectory. And we have tried to set a career path and to analyse it in a very linear way. But it's a very female profession, so we have these things about maternity, about flexibility—they want to work near their house. So I think we need to better understand these long-term trajectories. Maybe we have to pay more attention and give them more chances to come back, more support, more open doors. Because maybe it just took two or three years, so instead they could have long maternity leave.

Elsayed, M. A. A., & Roch, C. H. (2021). Former Teachers: Exits and Re-Entries. *Educational Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048211019972>.

For an example of how gender affects teacher career trajectories in Pakistan, see Soufia Anis Siddiqi's remarks in [Chapter 8](#).

JESSICA

So interesting, huh?

Democracy, civil society, and context specificity in teacher norms

YUE-YI

I feel like our conversation could go on for another three hours, but here's a final question: are there any last words you'd like to leave us with? I know this could go in a billion other directions.

JESSICA

I know, and I know my propensity to go on tangents. I know what I'll say! This is going to sound like it's not related, but just give me a second. You know how a few days ago Facebook had a temporary outage, and this also took down Instagram and WhatsApp? And there were a lot of places in the world where this messed up the economy because

a lot of small businesses use WhatsApp and Facebook and Instagram to trade; and I think, in India, WhatsApp is one of the primary ways that people interact, so people couldn't talk to their families. I saw these really great threads on Twitter of people who were saying, "You know, the biggest problem here is that you've got this one really powerful entity who has been afraid of any other competing companies, so they just buy them up. So you've got this monopoly. And in doing so, they've got so much power that they've just got to make one mistake, and all of a sudden, it shuts down whole institutions."

So if we think about the teaching profession in a similar way, when we think about norms and we think about teachers and teaching, it's like the fewer hands who are involved in deciding what those norms are, the more likely you are to get to a point where the norms are not going to actually achieve the equity that everybody claims is the thing that we care most about. If we're looking for robust democracies, we're looking for equitable environments where diverse groups of people can participate equally, then we can't have just a few powerful actors making the decisions about what counts as good. And in the same way that Facebook should not own the world. It may sound strange, but that's my analogy, and I'll leave it there.

YUE-YI

I like that analogy. Verónica, any last words from you about teacher norms?

VERÓNICA

I have a lot of things to say, so I'm just going to say the headlines, okay? First, what I tried to say at the beginning is the importance of the school context. I really loved the work of Papay and Kraft in this book that is called *Teaching in Context*, where they wrote a chapter called "Developing workplaces where teachers stay, improve, and succeed". So what I'm trying to say with this is that it's so important to understand and strengthen the context where teachers are working in specific schools. We're talking about micro norms, micro policies, the relationships within these schools, the kind of leadership, et cetera. So that's the first thing, the teaching context.

The second thing, something that has not appeared in this conversation, but I think it's important that it's on the agenda, is about the differences between elementary, high school, and early childhood teachers. We never really put so much attention to early childhood teachers. And they have different norms; they have different ways of doing their work; the organisations where they're working have different ways of organisation. So it's very, very important that we pay enough attention to that. We need amazing early childhood teachers, amazing early childhood centres. So we need to talk about early childhood teachers as well as the rest of the teachers. And I think that usually we're talking about elementary and high school teachers in schools, so we're setting aside the early childhood teachers, you know.

Papay, J.A., & Kraft, M.A. (2017). *Developing Workplaces Where Teachers Stay, Improve, and Succeed: Recent evidence on the Importance of School Climate for Teacher Success*. In Quintero, E. (ed.). (2017). *Teaching in context: The social side of education reform*. Harvard Education Press.

For a similar observation, see remarks from interlocutor Soufia Siddiqi in [Chapter 8](#).

And the third thing is about the role of civil society. So, for example, I'm talking about Elige Educar. We'll need more NGOs and civil society engaging in these topics and making their contribution. It's not only about what the government can do, or what each school can do. We also need the power of civil society, and we need to work together to improve this. So that's all I wanted to say.

CHAPTER 3

On individual agency, societal norms, contradictions, and teachers' thought processes

Joan DeJaeghere & Shwetlena Sabarwal

Joan DeJaeghere is Professor of Comparative and International Development Education in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development at the University of Minnesota. Her scholarship is concerned with gender and ethnic/racial inequalities in education and how they affect youth's future civic engagement, livelihoods, and wellbeing. Joan has led multi-year research studies on educational projects and systems reform, working with governments and organisations in Bangladesh, Honduras, India, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Vietnam. She served on the International Technical Advisory Panel for the Global Partnership in Education in 2021–22 and currently co-leads the RISE Vietnam country research team.



Shwetlena Sabarwal is a Senior Economist at the World Bank. She was a co-author for the World Development Report 2019 on the Changing Nature of Work, the World Development Report 2018 on Learning to Realize Education's Promise, and World Bank's widely read policy note on "The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy Responses". Her research has been published in leading journals. Shwetlena has led World Bank's education engagement in Uganda, Tanzania, Bangladesh, and Nepal. She holds a PhD in Applied Economics from University of Minnesota. She is currently working on a book on *Teacher Motivation and Mindsets*.



This conversation took place on 7 October 2021.

YUE-YI

To set the scene, can you talk about a story or experience or just general example that illustrates how norms among teachers can affect behaviour or practice in ways that might not be anticipated by the formal rules, by economic models, or just by conventional images of teachers?

SHWETLENA

One story which has really influenced my thinking comes from South Asia, where I grew up and where I've been doing a lot of work recently. When we look at the data, South Asia more than any other place shows that children are not learning, right? You will have a child who's been in primary school for six years and doesn't know how to add with carryover. Then you realise, "Oh, they're going to leave primary school without functional numeracy. And many of them will not even go to secondary school." Basically, they've been utterly failed by the system.

But then when you go and talk to the teachers, they feel that they're doing so much for learning—like if you asked them, "Are you are you focused on learning?" And we thought they would say, "Oh, you know, we get so caught up with curriculum completion," or, "We have so many administrative duties, so that's why we are not focusing on learning." But no, they feel they're doing amazingly in terms of learning, and they think they're doing a great job. So this is very perplexing. And then the teachers kept saying, "Look at this child: he got 100 upon 100 in a test and he's doing so well." They'll pick these three or four students, and they'll say they're doing well.

Then when I came out of the ministry—this was in Bangladesh— I was in the car, and I was really confused. Then I saw this billboard with an advertisement for a tutoring centre. And the advertisement said, "Three toppers in the board exam." It had photos of these three students who got 100 upon 100 in the national standardised exam. And that's when it just hit me that the whole society is set up to think about learning as the three or four chosen children who crack this very difficult exam, right? And nobody talks about minimum proficiency. So their idea of learning is not how many children can do addition with carryover; it is how many children get 100 out of 100 in the primary school leaving exam. So that, for me, has been very transformative.

JOAN

When you started talking about the tutoring billboard, Shwetlena, I thought you were going to talk about how one of the norms is that tutoring is a way to get to exam success. I actually have a graduate student right now, Nisma Elias, who is examining tutoring centres in Bangladesh. And she's looking not only at their learning outcomes, but also social capital and cultural capital, to answer the question of: why are so many students participating in private tutoring? Because often these are already the cream of the crop.

To shift gears, my example has some related points, but in some ways it also points in the opposite direction—because I'm going to be speaking in reference to Vietnam, where they're generally perceived to have better learning outcomes and to be more equitable across the population. But there are some interesting paradoxes.

There's this assumed model of teaching, where basically teachers should show up; and if they show up, they should teach the content effectively; and then students

For a similar argument about paying the most attention to the children at the top of the achievement distribution in the context of India, see Muralidharan, K., & Singh, A. (2021). India's new National Education Policy: Evidence and challenges. *Science*, 372(6537), 36–38. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abf6655> (open-access version: <https://riseprogramme.org/publications/indias-new-national-education-policy-evidence-and-challenges>).

For a related example of different conceptions of children's learning, see interlocutor Luis Crouch's opening example in [Chapter 12](#).

learn—so there’s almost a linearity in the model. And that’s why I think there’s been so much focus in policy and research on teacher absenteeism, time on task, and basic learning skills. But, of course, we know there are many other factors in that teaching and learning relationship.

One of the norms that’s common in Vietnam, and I think globally is viewed as best practice, is that teachers need to have a lesson plan, right? And sometimes the expectation is that they even need very scripted textbooks in an effort to improve learning outcomes. In fact, in Vietnam, there’s a national database available for lesson plans that are related to the national curriculum. So everyone downloads these plans, and they share their lesson plans, so they can choose between them.

What we found, when we went around observing and interviewing teachers in Vietnam, is that they know these plans very well. They can repeat back to us exactly what the objectives are, what they’re going to teach. And we’d expect that teachers are going to use different pedagogical practices, so you should get some variation, right? But I think what’s interesting in Vietnam is that you find that there’s actually a lot of uniformity. And in a new paper that Pedro Carneiro, Paul Glewwe, Anusha Guha, and Sonya Krutikova have just done on classroom-level value-added in Vietnam, they found that the contribution of teacher quality was much smaller than many other places—which echoes this finding of uniformity of teacher practice.

Here’s the paradox: on the one hand, you can have teachers showing up, and teaching according to their lesson plans, and students are learning—and teachers’ attention is focused on getting all students to learn, at least to the most basic level, so that teachers can get their merit pay or whatever. Now, we could say, looking at global averages, that’d be great, right? But, on the other hand, what it hides is what the students aren’t learning—and who’s not learning. Because teachers still have some fundamental beliefs that some students are going to just barely make it to that basic level and never study beyond. And therefore, as we’ve written about elsewhere, ethnic minority students are given attention to get to that basic level, but not beyond. This objective to have everyone achieve to a basic level is reflected in these standard lesson plans.

And the other thing we’re seeing, in terms of what students aren’t learning—and we see it in both our quantitative studies and our qualitative studies—is that they may be learning content assessed by test results, but there are a lot of other, non-cognitive skills that are in the curriculum now that they may not be learning. And it’s interesting because in the most recent analysis of that classroom value-added paper, they actually didn’t find much correlation between teachers who added value for cognitive skills and teachers who added value for noncognitive skills.

My point here is that, of course, there are norms around what makes someone a quality teacher, but the norms don’t always result in student learning in some of these other, really important areas. That’s my story, from our RISE Vietnam studies, and these are also observations you see when you go out to these schools.

For more on norms around lesson plans in Vietnam, see the discussant essay by Vu Dao and Khoa Vu in [Chapter 16](#).

For Sonya Krutikova’s conference presentation on this paper, see <https://youtu.be/yuFbFZCxi78?t=1241>.

DeJaeghere, J., Dao, V., Duong, B.-H., & Luong, P. (2021). Learning inequities in Vietnam: Teachers’ beliefs about and classroom practices for ethnic minorities. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2021.1924621>. You can also listen to Joan and her co-author Vu Dao discuss this study on the RISE Podcast: <https://riseprogramme.org/podcast/joan-dejaeghere-vu-dao>.

On non-cognitive skills in Vietnamese classrooms, see Duong, B.-H., & DeJaeghere, J. (2022). From Student-Centered to Competency-Based Reform: Exploring Teachers’ Perspective of Meaningful Participation. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/089. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/089.

Varied expectations of students and of teachers

SHWETLENA

You blew my mind, Joan, you blew my mind! Because where you are in Vietnam is where we are trying to get in all the other countries, right? We want to make sure each student really gets to basic proficiency, and we want to make sure teachers have lesson plans. I think for a lot of countries it would be an ultimate goal to have this database of lesson plans that they can download, but hearing you talk about the other side is really, really interesting to me.

JOAN

And I don't want to suggest that that we should forego attention to content knowledge, because obviously we need it, and there are places around the world where we need to get to basic literacy and basic numeracy.

At the same time, it's not only that most students aren't learning these other non-cognitive skills. There's also an underlying belief that it's enough for certain kids if we just get them to basic levels. And another piece of this, and Yue-Yi knows the story of it, is that in Vietnam there's a pretty big dropout at Grade 9 of the kids who just meet the basics and aren't getting beyond that basic level. So Vietnam has great numbers in terms of school participation through basic education—that is, through Grade 9—but its upper secondary enrolment is around 68 percent, so nearly a third of students aren't completing this level of secondary.

SHWETLENA

I just wanted to give a counter-norm that I've seen in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, which is that teachers feel like it's not their job to work toward basic proficiency for students who are lagging behind. They say that it's the parents' job, right? They feel that: this is the level of curriculum for Grade 3; and if a child entering Grade 3 has not mastered the foundations for them to be able to follow the Grade 3 curriculum, then it's not their job to help the child catch up; because the child is just coming from these poor and uneducated households, and there's nothing they can do in terms of remediation. And there is just this strong idea: what are the parents doing? You hear this line over and over again, "What are the parents doing?" "What about the parents?" "Aren't we going to talk about the parents?" So these are very interesting counterpoints to what you're describing in Vietnam.

See also [Chapter 9](#) for interlocutor Ying-yi Hong's remarks on growth mindsets versus entity (fixed) views about intelligence in Hong Kong.

YUE-YI

This sort of blame game was very much alive in the sort of school where I taught. In Malaysia, if you're in a high-need secondary school, where some kids have just been

falling further and further behind throughout all of their years in school, it's not unusual for teachers, whether at assembly or in classes, to just call kids "stupid". Like, "Students in this school are just stupid." And the thing is, I knew the teachers personally, and they were compassionate people who really cared about the kids and would express that when talking to them one-to-one. But just for emotional self-defence, for the sake of not burning out, you need to be able to attribute these massive learning gaps to someone or something outside of yourself. And that can be such a vicious cycle in so many ways.

Let's move a bit more directly to the "what" of teacher norms. So, can we branch out from these initial examples to looking at the whole range of influential norms in the context you've studied? What are professional norms, organisational norms, social norms? And Shwetlena, it would be great if you could bring in a bit of the examples from your survey across countries, because I think that's really interesting.

SHWETLENA

I feel that what I have studied may not may or may not qualify as a norm. So I'm a little bit nervous about that. But basically, I did a 10-question survey in nine countries. And there were four things that came out very strongly. One was this idea that "remediation is not my job". That "there is nothing I can do for certain children"—this is a very widely accepted statement for a teacher to make in these contexts where I worked, although, of course, it varies.

The second idea that's very strong is that some children deserve more attention. And this is not necessarily linked to wealth, but it's linked to hard work. So if a teacher sees a hardworking child, they feel they deserve more attention. And I can also understand this thought process, because these classes are so big that a teacher cannot give attention to everybody. Right? I've talked to Abhijit Banerjee a little bit about this, because he's one of the first in the econ literature to write about this, in Poor Economics—this idea that a teacher has to have some kind of strategy for how she will devote her attention, because there are so many students, and they have different ability levels. So the idea is that the teacher basically decides to back the winning horse, which is a very understandable strategy from an economic rationality standpoint, right? So the teacher will essentially think, "Who is really going to follow what I'm saying, who's really interested, who's coming every day, who's got the materials?" And then that child deserves more attention.

And the third norm that a teacher is more than a teacher, but also a community leader. The teacher is often the only educated community focal person, so the teacher goes on election duty, does public health services, they were enrolled for the COVID response in a lot of places—so it's seen as completely fine for the teacher to be absent from school, because they have many more important things to do than just teach. And it's completely okay to leave children unsupervised with class work to do, and so on. Again, I'm talking about broad patterns there, and we have some contextual

Sabarwal, S., Abu-Jawdeh, M., & Kapoor, R. (2022). Teacher Beliefs: Why They Matter and What They Are. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 37(1), 73–106. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lkab008>.

For a related observation on teachers being absent from the classroom, see remarks from interlocutor Laura Savage in [Chapter 15](#).

differences. But the shocking thing is that it's actually not that different: in almost every context, you will have 20, 25 percent of teachers who answer this way.

The final thing I will say is that there was one norm which I found to be highly context-specific—and I'm calling it norm not knowing if it is or not—which is this idea of whether a teacher deserves a bonus if students are doing well in tests. And you see that in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, there is a huge share of people who believe, "Yes, that should be rewarded and recognised." But in the more middle-income countries with better learning outcomes, like Argentina and Indonesia, it's, "No, that's a teacher's job."

Just one more thing, and then I'll stop there, but to the point earlier about self-defence and blame: so I did this one study in Uganda, where we randomised teachers into two groups within the same school to get a sense of how they rate themselves versus how they rate other teachers in the same school. Right? And you get a strong sense of this blame game, in that teachers really feel that they are better than average compared to other teachers in the school. They feel like the other teachers are not as good or as conscientious. So there is not just blame to parents, there's also blame other teachers. And we found that the lazier and the more incompetent the teacher was—and you could tell this based on measures like whether teachers had lesson plans—the more likely they were to be overconfident about their own ability as a teacher. So it's basically Dunning-Krueger in practice.

Connections and contradictions between teacher norms and sociopolitical norms

JOAN

I just find what you have to say really interesting. And I read your study with interest as well, Shwetlena, because I do think we see some similar beliefs about teacher practice based on societal norms around, like, "The poor kids can't really learn so we won't give them attention." We see that despite the societal norm to teach everyone to a very basic level.

So what I wanted to say, Yue-Yi, when I was thinking through this, and then exchanging thoughts with my co-authors Hang and Vu, is that we were trying to separate out norms that exist in society—that come out of long-term practices, larger social norms, and cultural expectations—and norms around what teachers believe and do. And they're related, right? In our own study, when we talked about teachers having beliefs about ethnic minority students' abilities to achieve, that were pretty negative in some ways, these beliefs don't just exist among teachers. But they exist because the society has always minoritised different groups of ethnic minorities in different ways, calling them backward. You see this historically in the constitution, in

The Dunning-Krueger effect is a posited cognitive bias such that people who are less competent also have less ability to accurately assess their relative competence. Kruger, J., & Dunning, D. (1999). Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77(6), 1121–1134. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.77.6.1121>

public discourse, in policies. And you do have this connection between larger social norms and, the organisational and professional norms.

But there are also these contradictions that societies have. On the one hand, I always think it's really interesting to try and make sense of what, in Vietnam, equality really means, especially in the education context, alongside this idea that some people can't and shouldn't achieve. And even in interviews we did with people in the ministry, a few years ago, at the beginning of this project, one man's views just blew me off my feet when he said, "I really believe that upper secondary school should be completely privatised." This, to me, is totally the antithesis of how the rest of the education system operates in Vietnam—except that now they've shifted to more of a socialist-oriented market economy. And so you see some arguments that that upper secondary, and then even more so university, could be privatised, but the rest of the education system should be public and should emphasise achieving equality to some level. So you get these paradoxes even within a group of societal norms that say one thing and then also expect the other as well.

SHWETLENA

Joan, you are so right about the contradictions, and I just wanted to mention two other contradictions that I have seen, which have really thrown me off. One is towards pregnant adolescent girls. When you go into meetings with the ministry, so there is so much press coverage saying, "Oh, the government does care about their education." But the government is made up of people, right? And these people include women leaders and teachers and women ministers who are saying, "We can't let these girls pollute the minds of our other adolescent girls." So they're reinforcing the norm of purity, even though they are saying that they really care about women. It's such a contradiction.

The other contradiction that I've seen again and again is on English-medium instruction. Joan, I've been fascinated to hear about English instruction in Vietnam, because I know it's a big issue. We are saying, "Teach in a local language," and all of that. But it's not some corrupt government minister asking for English-medium: it's parents; it's teachers, saying, "Oh, no, if you make it Hindi medium or Bangla medium, these children will not be able to compete, they will not get jobs, so we have to teach them in English." The fiercest resistance we get to local-language instruction is from communities and from teachers. It's this whole idea of elite education being "corrupted" by all these marginal people coming in, as you were saying, Joan. And people talk, ministers talk all the time about the good old days when the standard of education was so high. I don't know if you guys have encountered it.

YUE-YI

Oh, all the time in Malaysia. But that's the people who were lucky enough to go to mission schools in the colonial administrative cities, when a far smaller percentage of

people in school, and they look back and say, “Everyone could speak English when I was in school.”

JOAN

Yes, the 20 percent of the population that was represented in the schools at the time could. Really fascinating contradiction. There are so many of these contradictions. I don’t know, Yue-Yi, is this getting at the “*what*” of teacher norms that you were interested in?

YUE-YI

It’s all getting at what I’m interested in. The challenge of this teacher norms project is that it’s such a sprawling topic. But Joan, why don’t you continue with some of your thoughts and get into the “*why*” as well? So the question of how norms emerge and what sorts of factors and relationships underlie them.

I wanted to throw in something from my own side, Shwetlana, about the variation in the norm around performance pay that you mentioned—again, I’m using “norm” in a very liberal way. In my PhD research on teacher accountability, and sociocultural context, I did some PISA and TIMSS analysis, but I also interviewed teachers in Finland and Singapore. And in Singapore, the government has over decades constructed this very economic-development-oriented narrative, where it’s work-for-reward, it’s competition, it’s meritocracy. So teachers there would feel very deprofessionalised and very unfairly treated if they didn’t have performance pay. Whereas teachers in Finland, because they say, “We all got selected for teacher training, we all have master’s degrees. So we are all equally qualified professionals.” And they were like, “You know, more money would be nice, and more recognition would be nice, but not at the cost of introducing inequality and unfairness.” So it’s such a socially rooted understanding of how teacher compensation should work, and it’s so hard to disentangle. But so fascinating.

JOAN

In some senses, what this brings me back to is always remembering that education is political, right? And so education is inherently tied to the political structures and philosophies of the time, which are not static. Vietnam is a good example of this pay and professional status question that you were just talking about. In Vietnam, with Đổi Mới, they undertook a change in the economy to become a socialist-oriented market economy and to open up to global trade, et cetera. Some people will tell you, “Sure, Đổi Mới was an economic reform, but it didn’t actually result in an education reform.” So interestingly, there’s this disjuncture where the society—as a socialist society—has always seen education as very political, as a means of socialising people to be the good communist man or woman. And yet, when that shift happened with Đổi Mới, education didn’t shift with it the same way.

Hwa, Y.-Y. (2022). ‘Our system fits us’: Comparing teacher accountability, motivation, and sociocultural context in Finland and Singapore. *Comparative Education*, 58(4), 542–561. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2022.2102754>.

‘Đổi Mới’, which translates as ‘to innovate’ or ‘to renovate’, refers to a set of economic reforms initiated in 1986.

Going back to the example of pay for performance—with the political change in Vietnam, it became more capitalist, more open. There is more privatisation, more autonomy. So teachers, too, see that happening in the larger system, and they themselves also want to be part of that system. And yet, at the same time, they want to be protected as political and social leaders of society. So again, you have both happening, right? There is emphasis on merit, with a lot of bonuses paid for merit, and I think those bonuses are seen as very normal; they have teacher competitions to award those bonuses, which does reflect these political and societal changes that have happened since Đổi Mới. And yet at the same time, they are also still teaching many aspects of a socialist political ideology. So we have to look at some of these underlying causes around why and when teachers buy into these norms, and how they shift with the norms in their daily practices in relation to the larger political and social norms that we've been talking about. And that is, I think, really fascinating. There are fascinating examples across the other countries in RISE too.

YUE-YI

Thanks, Joan. At any point in the interview, feel free to come back to any of the threads that we've mentioned before, but just to get it on the table: another thing that we want to talk about is the “*how*”, or approaches for reorienting teacher norms for systemwide improvement. What approaches have worked, what seem likely to work—and you're welcome to bring in examples from non-education domains. As mentioned before, feel free to speculate.

Reflective classroom practice amid societal pressures

JOAN

Can I add just one thought related to what I was saying around how teachers carry out both these political and social norms in the larger society, and yet they're sometimes conflicting as change happens? I'm not an economist, I'm an educator, and so we think about this less in terms of incentives, and more in terms of educational practices. So we've been talking a lot about what teacher education needs to do to actually shift some of these norms, to create cultural change at that individual level and then a larger social level.

I bring this up partly because in Vietnam, at least, there's not a whole lot of reflection around teaching practices, teaching styles, teaching beliefs that happens in the teacher education degree. There's just not a reflective sociocultural understanding of, “Who am I and why do I teach this way? And what do I believe about teaching? And how does that reflect the larger discipline? And how does it reflect the larger society?” But rather, the teacher education degree, like every university programme, has some element of teaching about Marxism-Leninism. So teaching around norms still happens in a very

For some examples of how Vietnamese education has changed with Đổi Mới, see Pham, L., & Duong, B.-H. (2021). Education, globalization, and citizenship: Reflections of Vietnamese local school teachers and overseas-educated academics. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 42(5), 665–681. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2020.1836746>

dogmatic way, and it's not about the reflective practice of "Who am I as a teacher in this changing society." We talk a lot about trying to reorient some aspects of teacher education, and how that ties to both the wider discourse and teacher policy, then through teacher education and to teacher practice.

YUE-YI

Interestingly, the RISE Indonesia team also struggled with the lack of reflective teacher practice and their study of novice teachers, where they followed teachers of a couple of years and got them to write journal entries on different prompts. And they found that the entries were, especially initially, not very reflective because the teachers were used to writing in the style of formal reports rather than reflections.

JOAN

Absolutely. Just another really quick example, in our interviews, we asked a question about "What is your style for teaching practice?" We debated that question for so long among our research team because, for one, my researchers thought that teachers would never think about a style, that they would never think in that reflexive way. Rather, they would answer it about, well, "What sort of practices do you use?" So, "I do group work, and I do lectures, and I do this, and I do that." And they know those practices because they've been trained very specifically to do different practices that match parts of your lesson plan. But to think about your overall style, no. Some of them commented more about their personality and some social and emotional characteristics that they bring into the classroom, but it wasn't a reflexive response. So, to your point, they couldn't answer the question because they'd never been given the opportunity.

YUE-YI

One more point before we go over to Shwetlena: one of the contradictions that I experienced as a student and later a teacher in Malaysia is that since I was in primary school, our ministry had been pushing critical and creative thinking skills, later rebranded as higher-order thinking skills. But then when I was a teacher, I was a legally a civil servant, which meant that I was not supposed to talk about certain sensitive topics, including aspects of government and politics, aspects of religion and race. So you want teachers to teach critical thinking, but you don't allow them to share that critical thinking aspect of themselves with students, even though it's about salient issues of the day.

Which relates to an aspect of the "how" we can reorient norms that I'd be curious to hear about: one tensions that I'm interested in is that at RISE we talk a lot about systemwide alignment and coherence. But at the same time, I think anyone who really values the teacher profession recognises that there are certain aspects of autonomy, that are really, really important for a very strong professional corps of teachers. So

As discussed by RISE Indonesia researcher Shintia Revina in episode 3 of the RISE Podcast: <https://riseprogramme.org/podcast/shintia-revina>. For an interview with Shintia and fellow interlocutor Belay Hagos Hailu, see Chapter 7.

there's a question of how can we attempt to orient norms at the system level, while still respecting teacher autonomy.

But anyway, Shwetlena, any responses to what Joan's been saying? Or any thoughts about "how" we can reorient teacher norms?

Individual-level autonomy and system-level priorities

SHWETLENA

I'm terrified about saying anything. Because, first of all, Joan has blown my mind and I'm rethinking everything. And you know, people think economists are so arrogant, but the truth is, I feel so embarrassed talking about teacher mindsets, because like my training has not equipped me for that in any way. So, Joan, please feel free to come in and challenge some of the things I'm going to say! But they're going to be very economist-y.

Basically, on teacher education, I completely agree. I have to say that one contradiction that really grips me right now is between uniformity and autonomy, and initiative and creativity, right? Because, in some sense, I do see that what World Bank is doing, and what UNICEF is doing, and what we're all doing is trying to impose this uniformity. Not to kill autonomy, but just to make sure that some basic standards are met. But we haven't thought about what this uniformity will affect, right? In fact, we worry that there is too much heterogeneity. You know, you were talking about the teacher absenteeism studies—and I've been a part of all of that. I've actually really pushed that narrative, like, "Make sure the teacher doesn't sleep in class."

JOAN

But there are contexts where that's very, very relevant, Shwetlena. I'm not dismissing it.

SHWETLENA

No, not that you are, but I'm also for the first time seeing what the other side of it could look like, right?

So, about what to do. Basically, I think there's the system level and an individual level. And on the system level, I would like echo a lot of the work that Lant has done, which has been very formative for my thinking— which is that if you really want some of these norms to shift, we have to really value minimum proficiency for all students. And right now it's not valued, right? Joan, I found your discussion about cultural ideology very interesting. And even if the cultural ideology is very capitalistic, which it now is in most contexts, then minimum proficiency for all is very aligned with that.

For more on the relationship between standardisation and autonomy in teacher practice, see (among others) the remarks from interlocutors Lucy Crehan and Katlego Sengadi in [Chapter 6](#), from interlocutor Kwame Akeampong in [Chapter 12](#), and from interlocutors Jessica Holloway and Verónica Cabezas in [Chapter 2](#).

In fact, the top ten superstars are less economically profitable for you as a country than the everybody getting basic numeracy. So there is a realignment that needs to happen, and I think this “future of work” conversation has ignited it a little bit. So that is one aspect.

Alongside this, there has to be this lightening of the curriculum and administrative burden; and a kind of walking away from this teacher-as-community-leader narrative, which I think has been very harmful. And it’s no longer needed because the average literacy in a village or in a community has gone up. So you no longer need the teacher to be the focal community leader who can read letters for everybody, and who can decode administrative orders and things like that. That’s at the system level, and I think that advocacy work can really help to drive change. Even though they are in highly disfavoured, cross-country indices can really help change those norms. You know, when you see your country in the Human Capital Index—which can be criticised for many things—but it does push you to think, “Okay, why am I ranked so low.” And for the government of India, PISA results, in comparison to Vietnam, are really important. The results really shake them up.

Then at the individual level, I’m doing a lot of this experimentation now on two things. One is changing this narrative to, “You can do something about the learning of the lowest rung.” And I think it has to be a positive message, that you can do something, that a good teacher would make sure that everybody learns—because you also have to feel for the teachers, right? They have to finish the curriculum, and they’re teaching division, but then there are 15 children in the class who don’t know addition, so what are they going to do? So I totally feel that these positive narratives will help, along with giving them the structures to do it, like Teaching at the Right Level and others like that.

So on the individual level, I think these social psychology interventions combined with education practice interventions will work. But they should come together. I see a lot of people doing growth mindset interventions, and I see a lot of people doing lesson plan interventions, right? They should get them together somehow. And I also think that the power of teacher networks can be harnessed for some of this norm shaping. I’ve been very struck by the recent work by groups like STiR where the teacher networks are seen as an engine for change. And even during COVID this was a big help, where teachers really craved being able to talk to other teachers.

For an interview with STiR founder Sharath Jeevan and fellow interlocutor Dan Honig, see [Chapter 4](#).

YUE-YI

Joan, want to come in with any thoughts?

JOAN

There are so many whirling thoughts. Interesting ideas, including that last one about teacher networks. But I actually want to go back to this challenge that you brought up, Shwetlena, around, on the one hand, knowing that we need some level of uniformity. I think Lant would call some of that coherence within a system—that doesn’t mean that

coherence always results in uniformity, but it can. At the same time, how do you allow for creativity and the professionalism of educators? And even more so the ability to think critically, next to uniformity in getting all students to learn the basics of literacy or numeracy. I think this is just such a fundamental challenge in Vietnam.

Again, I think we can't understand what interventions should be used to try and improve uniformity alongside creativity and critical thinking unless we understand how they're going to be adapted within a sociopolitical environment. You know, the lesson planning was adopted really well in Vietnam, because it's a highly structured system. So that was easy to take up and do lesson planning like that—but then what's the result of it? There was over-uniformity, to some extent. And that also fits well within the political narrative because they don't really want critical thinkers. And a little side note to what you brought up, Yue-Yi, about critical thinking: so there is a group of people (education experts and critics) who push for different aspects of change in the education system, like pushing for more critical thinking, more creativity, more openness in Vietnamese society. These are the same people who will say that *Đổi Mới* happened in the economy, but it didn't happen in education. And so they've been in some regards able to help advocate for this more competency-based curriculum in Vietnam—to focus not just on learning and testing, but to try and get these other skills.

Critical thinking was initially included in that competency-based reform, and then it got axed. What happened was that competency-based education was approved by the party in 2012 or 13, I believe, and it's just rolling out in textbooks now, almost nine years later. But through those years, it got reviewed very heavily by the bureaucrats in the system, to define it very carefully so that it would sit alongside the social and political goals of society. The social and political goals of society are more concerned with cultural conservatism—maintaining a norm rather than completely disrupting it. So, as I said, critical thinking was left out of it.

And as we've talked to teachers, we've been asking, "What is critical thinking? How do you do it?" And there are always exceptional cases, but, broadly, it's very much related to the subject of math and deductive thinking.

My point being that this tension between uniformity and creativity, and teacher autonomy, always remains a push and pull between the policies and the curriculum at the top and teachers and their practice in the classroom. And often the adaptation in response to new interventions is to go back to the political and social norms that are existing in society, rather than to disrupt them.

Just a little side note—and this is just speculating—my research team was just talking yesterday about wanting to do more studies on teacher activists. And I was like, "Whoa, interesting. And will you find them?" Because there are teachers who do activism by writing things in blogs, and by acting in the community. But the question is, do they actually bring it back into their classroom? And I think most of them have a very divided personality, between being activists in society on certain issues, and yet not so much in the classroom because they could potentially be more penalised. So,

For more on the politics of creativity and critical thinking in the classroom, see interlocutor Ying-yi Hong's observations on teacher practice in Hong Kong in [Chapter 9](#).

to this point about how to change or reorient some of the norms, one thing might be to try and find these spaces of activism.

YUE-YI

Yes, that's a very encouraging prospect, if we could realise it. I could ask a billion more questions, but I do want to end on time. So, the last question for both of you is just, looking back over this conversation, are there any last words you'd like to leave us with?

Refocusing attention on teachers' beliefs and thought processes

JOAN

I'm always thinking about where the research agenda should go. As I was saying earlier, norms for me are the more codified structures that exist in relation to political ideologies, cultural practices, and social structures. And yet, even as teachers' practices and beliefs reflect those norms, they also can refract them and break them—which goes to your earlier question, Yue-Yi, about how durable norms are where change happens.

So my parting thought is: more attention to teacher practices and beliefs might help us understand the spaces for change. And I don't want to talk only about exceptional cases of activism. But I think if we can gather more data, both systematically and systemically, around teacher practices and beliefs—about where and how they shift—that would help us to see some of these departures from these norms.

What I have found, at least qualitatively—and actually, I would expect something similar from surveys like yours as well, Shwetlena—is that, when you ask people these questions, they have to reflect on them. And that in itself already helps to establish a different way to think about their practice that is different from the norm, especially if the norm is something that's not working for everyone. So research can both illustrate where those practices are breaking, and it can actually prompt some reflection on how to deviate or break from certain norms.

SHWETLENA

I would echo that. Obviously, teacher beliefs have been my big passion, and I'm working on this book and all. But I think the main thing I will say, bringing my economist hat, is why I think norms are so important is because they make complete sense to teachers. Right? It's not just a norm, it is a belief that is completely rational. And it has not just a social imperative, it has a logical and rational and economic or whatever imperative as well. In some situations, it is the only thing they can do.

One of the things that annoys me sometimes about some of this research is we treat teachers as very passive—not you guys, I mean, but some of the work you read. Where even when something like norms, there is a danger that you caricature teachers as these passive recipients who are acting out these rooted social things. I think it's more active than that. And I think there's a good deal not just of rationalisation, but of completely rational decision-making and optimisation that's happening here.

Even for my work, in 2008, when we saw that headteachers were holding books and not distributing them to children—that was one of my first papers—I was very dissatisfied with how that finding was framed. Because some observers thought, “Oh, those headteachers just don't care.” But it wasn't that. They just didn't know when the next shipment would come. So they were trying to smooth their consumption. It was a completely rational decision. And I was so disappointed because people knew that books were not being distributed, but they had not unlocked the reason. Then they kept thinking that training the headteachers is going to change things, but the training would have done bupkis, right? It would have done zero. You have to solve the predictable supply problem.

So I would say the same thing about the teacher norm project. Like even if you dislike a certain norm—like I said just now that they're not letting pregnant girls go to school and study, and it's a huge problem—but we have to really understand their thought process and not be very quick to assign people to these inescapable social and cultural factors.

JOAN

Great point, Shwetlena. I like that.

Sabarwal, S., Evans, D. K., & Marshak, A. (2014). The permanent input hypothesis: The case of textbooks and (no) student learning in Sierra Leone (No. WPS7021; pp. 1–37). The World Bank. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/806291468299200683/The-permanent-input-hypothesis-the-case-of-textbooks-and-no-student-learning-in-Sierra-Leone>.

CHAPTER 4

On motivation, management, measurement, and the invisible thread between student and teacher

Dan Honig & Sharath Jeevan

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This conversation took place on 14 October 2021.

YUE-YI

Could you tell a story that illustrates how norms can be very influential, especially when they're influential in a way that might not conform to rules or not conform to expectations? Ideally with teachers, but it could also be with anyone else at all.

SHARATH

During my first few months at STiR in Delhi, we were working with a teacher called Dr Indra. She was a PhD holder, very brainy, and she was part of a government-assisted school chain in Delhi. At that point, STiR was all about trying to find micro-innovations for teachers. And she said, “You know, I’ve got four months to go.” And I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “Four months before retirement.” And basically she was coasting through the last period of her career, and almost given up on her career overall.

But we found an idea that she had about teaching English as a foreign language. She was in a school where for most kids it wasn’t a native language, obviously. The idea seemed to really fire her up and change her perspective. She started propagating that idea among other teachers. And, very quickly, she took on a leadership role—the other schools in the chain started to get her to engage and to help them bring all these ideas into practice.

So the really interesting part was that we were starting off trying to find ideas and innovations from teachers, and we realised that, actually, the mindset and motivation piece was much more important than specific innovations. And just seeing how quickly these things could change in one person was quite inspiring for me personally.

For more on STiR Education, see <https://stireducation.org/>.

YUE-YI

I’m so pleased that you shared a positive story. Dan, any stories or anecdotes to share?

DAN

It’s a lovely question, and it’s a lovely thing to reflect on. What comes to mind is the thing that first got me thinking about norms in the public sector. I was co-running a small NGO in East Timor—that was about 20 years ago—and there was an agricultural extension agent, who was helping farmers to learn a new practice that the government was trying to roll out. And the agent found an innovative way to communicate it and actually roll it out in the group. He didn’t follow the script; he worked to understand what the farmers knew and didn’t know. It seemed to me such a perfect example of what I thought an agricultural extension agent was meant to do. So here was a guy who had worked with the community in a way that made people happier with the intervention, and delivered more welfare, to the extent that the new practice was useful, right?

A while later I was speaking to his boss’ boss, and his boss’ boss asked how things have been going in the field. I said, “Really wonderfully,” and I told this story and said how excited and impressed I was. And he said, “Oh, that’s wonderful.”

Maybe a month later, I saw the same agent, and he was like, “Hey, I don’t want to talk to you anymore. Don’t come to my site.” I said, “Why?” He said, “You know, I got in some trouble. You complained to my supervisor about me.” And I said, “No, I didn’t.

I mean, I didn't complain. I praised you. And I admit, I didn't ask your permission—and I am very, very, very sorry that this caused you harm in some way. But I don't understand why." And he said, "Well, you told this person that I didn't follow the rules." I said, "Yes, but I told them that it made things better."

That was the first thing that got me started thinking about: to what extent does the system reward performance or motivate performance that actually drives towards the objective—and to what extent does it reward compliance? And when are those things in tension? And can there be such a thing as a social norm that actually pulls back from better performance inside the bureaucracy, that requires bad behaviour to do good work?

YUE-YI

Wow. One very encouraging story, one somewhat disheartening one. But I think you've both talked about some organisational norms that can affect people's lives—images of what good performance is, and also images of coasting toward retirement and how that can shift.

So let's get more into the "what": some of the other influential norms, whether norms that shape teacher practice—Sharath, it would be great if you could focus on that—or, for Dan, norms affecting anyone in public service. And feel free to bring in other aspects of organisational norms, social norms, or wider professional norms.

Invisible intrinsic motivations and compliance-oriented accountability structures

SHARATH

I could just start with the UK, since we're sitting here now, and in the UK this whole idea of a fear and compliance culture—like you mentioned, Dan—is becoming more and more the norm. And I think that with so many school principals in this country, they see their purpose as achieving a good Ofsted rating or doing well on a league table. So I do think it's very possible for those norms to go in the wrong direction altogether.

India is a classic example of this too. To tell a story that's sort of the opposite of my earlier one, we worked with a teacher who had changed around his classroom and started to do some really interesting work to get more peer learning going. His district inspector came in unannounced, and when he saw this peer learning he basically shouted at him. Within minutes, or even seconds, all of that work that had taken place over months just evaporated.

Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, is a UK government department that, among other things, inspects and rates schools.

So my view now is, basically, that we create order in systems in a way that severs the link with the ultimate beneficiary, to the child—so that what really matters for the child is almost taken out of the picture. And the system feeds itself because it starts to become a self-fulfilling system, where what really matters is bureaucratic compliance. I think that’s why teachers are so demotivated in most countries, because they can’t see the ultimate link to children.

It’s crazy because teaching is, intrinsically, an incredibly purposeful profession, but somehow the system makes it very much about the civil service piece and fulfilling those norms. And that link becomes so buried that you forget what it was like to start in the profession in the first place. I think most teachers do have a level of intrinsic motivation to begin with. But a challenge is that when you try to wake up that sense of intrinsic motivation and help teachers remember why they went into the profession, there’s also a sense of being vulnerable, because there’s a worry about punishment, as you said, Dan. It’s almost like a strange psychological trap, where they know in their heart of hearts what they should be doing purpose-wise, but they also know that the entire system keeps them from getting anywhere near that ultimate destination.

For more on the role of purpose and mindsets, see the interview with interlocutors Wendy Kopp and Margarita Gómez in [Chapter 5](#).

YUE-YI

When I was a teacher, I was often struck by differences in the way teachers talked about students versus the way teachers talked *to* students. Because when they were actually talking to children, you could see they really cared and wanted the best for them. But staffroom talk was much more negative. Also, I once got told off about how I was filling in the compulsory “reflections” section in our lesson plan record books, which were also compulsory. I was writing reflections on what I thought went well or went badly, but what they wanted me to write was, “36 out of 43 children fulfil the lesson objective.” So I completely appreciate what you’re saying.

Dan, any thoughts on this, or in other directions related to the “*what*” of teacher norms?

DAN

Actually, what you just said points nicely to how even well-meaning attempts to provide space for different kinds of thinking or different norms can become just another form of compliance. And that speaks to the persistence of the systems logic. I think the work that Yamini Aiyar and her co-authors have done for RISE describes this really well in the Indian system, or at least in Delhi schools, as well: this notion that any attempts to move away from the compliance culture can pretty easily become buried in it.

This isn’t just a teacher problem. The idea that compliance culture is on the rise, and that good performance increasingly means what is quantitatively reported, is a civil-service-wide, society-wide phenomenon. And I think sometimes this can be layered on to a culture where there is already intrinsic motivation, and there is a norm

Aiyar, Y., Davis, V., Govindan, G. & Kapoor, T. (2021). *Rewriting the Grammar of the Education System: Delhi’s Education Reform (A Tale of Creative Resistance and Creative Disruption)*. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE). https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-Misc_2021/01.

about actually caring about the result. But it's a fragile norm. It is very easy to snuff out motivation by layering on a compliance culture.

You know, you described my first intervention about the agricultural extension agent as a pessimistic story. But I think of it as an optimistic one. Except for the “me doing the wrong thing” part of it. Which is to say, even as we see norms that push bureaucrats, that push public servants, that push teachers in the direction of doing less and caring less, we also see lots and lots of examples of “deviants”—I’m doing air quotes now—of “deviants” who still care. Who, to use your way of framing that, Sharath, know in their heart of hearts what they should do. So that can't be about the system's logic. It has to be about their own logic, because the system is pushing them away from it. My view of the world is that most civil servants are good, and most teachers are good, because most *people* are good. And most people want their lives to have purpose and meaning, and to feel themselves to have done good things in the world. So we have a system that has been able to cope with an attempt to create norms which are, in my view, largely destructive, because of the inherent goodness of the people who populate the system. And that, to me, is incredible reason for hope.

SHARATH

To build on what Dan was saying, the challenges I was talking about relate to the idea that the teaching profession often faces “wicked” problems rather than “kind” problems. Like how Lant was talking about how you can't reduce teaching to logistics because there are millions of permutations in front of a teacher in the classroom every day. And the problem is that in a compliance culture they're trying to routinise all this stuff that teachers face.

One of the questions I'm thinking about a lot is: how can you get trust to come in, even when levels of proficiency might be quite low? How do you get teachers on a journey where they can keep improving, without diverting them into one of those systemic traps where they go after the wrong thing, but instead helping them keep the child front and centre? Because it feels like right now the system is pulling them away from the child. And what would really mean for the system to actually help them understand what the child needs, and really motivate and, to some extent, incentivise them to do what's right for the child?

If you look at most young people in emerging and developing countries, one of the main needs to address is that many of them are going to be in informal sector roles. These are going to be very uncertain, very fast-growth environments, and highly ambiguous ones, so all of these complex human skills are going to be key to the future of work, right? And then there's the question of citizenship—so how do schools try to develop these civic aspects? Again, a lot of this is about the relationship with the teacher, and the teacher being the role model. They're often the only educated role model in the children's lives. But I think what's happening is that we're not allowing teachers to have that relationship with the child because they're serving a bureaucratic machine. How do you make sure that the system maintains that invisible thread that

“Wicked” problems are problems that don't have a straightforward technical solution because of their complexity and conflicting goals. For an early use of the term, see Churchman, C. W. (1967). Guest editorial: Wicked Problems. *Management Science*, 14(4), B-141-B-142. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.14.4.B141>. For a formal definition, see Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4(2), 155–169. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730>. To hear Sharath speak about wicked problems in education systems, see <https://riseprogramme.org/podcast/sharath-jeevan>.

For more on wicked problems, see interlocutor Michael Woolcock's remarks on the lack of quick fixes for changing social norms in [Chapter 10](#).

Pritchett, L. (2013). *The rebirth of education: Schooling ain't learning*. Center for Global Development. See https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/rebirth-education-introduction_0.pdf.

is the connection between the child and the teacher, and keeps it central? My sense is that we've really pulled away from that core logic.

YUE-YI

I want to explore the “*why*” of that in a minute. But I think a story you might appreciate is that at a recent meeting of the RISE Intellectual Leadership Team, one of the team members said, “You know, RISE researchers talk so much about statistics showing low learning levels. But if you hear Rukmini Banerji speak, she always starts with love for the child. She always starts with, ‘We do this because we care about children, both the individual child and children collectively, and they are not learning as they should be, so we must help them.’” And Rukmini has been massively successful at improving education at scale from that starting point of love and purpose. So it's interesting to hear that reminder from you about the child-teacher relationship, because it echoes that recent reminder from our Intellectual Leadership Team.

Now, you've both talked about how the logic of compliance and standardisation have overtaken so many of our systems. Could you speculate about why there's such a gravitational pull toward this?

DAN

If I'm speculating, I guess I see a couple of larger social trends across different places. The first relates to the technological age we are in, which has led to many wonderful things. It has also given us a kind of reification of data—and the notion that it is somehow modern and advanced to do things which can be standardised, reported, put on a dashboard, et cetera. But that invisible thread of love between the teacher and the child is, as the name implies, invisible. And it is also invisible to those metrics, right? If I asked you to prove that the invisible thread existed for you, as a teacher, with any particular student, that would be quite difficult. If I asked you to do it for all the students in your class or for all the students served by a principal in their school, that would be impossible. And I think we've started to privilege certain kinds of knowledge over others in a way that dovetails with what I would describe—to use the account Sharath just gave—as being about pulling teachers' accountability and pulling their eyes upwards. So they're looking upwards towards the systems rather than downwards to the child. I don't mean “downwards” in a denigrating way, but just in terms of organisational structures for service delivery.

The other social trend, which also pushes a lot in this direction, is this notion that we need people to be accountable. I think what we need is the best possible performance. If something that we call accountability helps advance the best possible performance, I'm all for it. But if something called accountability means that we have lots of reporting that actually hurts the relationship between teachers and children, or between Child Protective Services officers and children, or between waste management delivery drivers and the trash they're meant to pick up, then that “something” is not in our best interest. And I think we have a system of targets which—to go back slightly to

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the “*what*”—is a kind of superstructure which sustains and reinforces the current equilibrium.

Nurturers, managers, principals, agents, and horizontal networks

SHARATH

To build on what Dan was saying, let’s take this idea of like nurturers and managers, which I was talking about in the book. Both a nurturer and a manager could be called a teacher, in either case. But, to your point, I think a nurturer would look at their accountability not upwards, but downwards—so it’s the child who ultimately matters. And it’s not the person paying the bills. The irony of this whole thing is that the child is invisible, because they have no economic power or coercive power. But, actually, they’re the people whom we need to be, quote, unquote, “accountable” for.

So I’ve been thinking about accountability more and more as a hygiene factor. It matters at a basic level: let’s make sure that no child should be beaten; there should be no violence or discrimination; schools should be safe places; we can ensure that toilets work; that midday meals, in India, are made on time; all that stuff. But beyond that, I think we just have to trust that a lot of it will be invisible. But how do you use some very basic, formative measures to just look after those things, but at the same time try to really focus on helping that teacher to be the best nurturer of the child, to build that relationship, so notice things they wouldn’t have seen otherwise, and create those pattern-spotting opportunities for improvement and to build on those?

DAN

Can I ask a question about that? Which is: do you see ways in which we could reframe accountability such that it helps teachers focus on nurturing and on relationships? I agree that top-down, observational accountability—which in other work I’ve called accounting-based accountability—will help us make sure that school facilities don’t put kids in physical danger and those kinds of things. But if we’ve met those basic standards, and now we’re aiming for nurturing, is there a way that horizontal peer support or other kinds of relationships or structures can create a different form of accountability? An accountability that reinforces the nurturing, that allows the teacher to, “I’m having trouble connecting with this child; can help me to reach him or her?” Have you seen examples of success, where we get that positive equilibrium, with an accountability base that pushes towards more nurturing rather than less?

SHARATH

I’ve been very inspired by all we’ve seen about the value of horizontal networks. STiR ended up running about 8,000 horizontal networks a month, pretty much. But

See Chapter 3: ‘Intrinsic success: From the few to the many’ in Jeevan, S. (2021). *Intrinsic: A manifesto to reignite our inner drive*. Endeavour. <https://www.hachette.com.au/sharath-jeevan/intrinsic-a-manifesto-to-reignite-our-inner-drive>.

For a related discussion on the challenge of paying attention to how successfully teachers are engaging with students in education systems where classroom-level is emphasises standardised checklists, see interlocutor Luis Crouch’s remarks in [Chapter 12](#).

Honig, D., & Pritchett, L. (2019). The Limits of Accounting-Based Accountability in Education (and Far Beyond): Why More Accounting Will Rarely Solve Accountability Problems. RISE Working Paper 19/030. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2019/030

that wasn't the challenge, because the networks themselves work really well. What we learned, though, is that the horizontal layers are important, but they need support from the vertical as well, because you're in a bureaucratic system. It's about giving space. So the leader above that network—whether that's the principal in the school or the district inspector or whoever it is in the structure—how do they “bless” that network and that create that space where teachers feel they can support each other in the network safely? But what sometimes happens is they lurch into back into the accountability-type culture, where we suddenly got this directive from the minister to do something different, and all of that long-term work building of horizontal networks can be destroyed very fast.

Still, I do think that, in the future, horizontal networks are where it's all going to be—in other industries, for example, look at how women are now trying to advance in corporate America through horizontal networks. More or more, that's how we're nurturing and building mastery collectively as well.

YUE-YI

This is a very half-formed thought so it might not be very articulate, but I've had conversations with some people who aren't keen on the term “horizontal accountability” because there isn't a clear separation between who the principal is and who the agent is in the accountability relationship. But I actually think it's possible to think of it in a way such that the individual agent feels accountable to the collective of their colleagues and peers.

DAN

Oh, totally. There's nothing about the principal-agent framework that requires us to look at the accountability relationship from the perspective of the principal. But that is the way it's normally done, with the assumption that the principal wants good things, and the agents might not. But of course the framework would also allow us to think the opposite, right? So let's imagine that there's a group of teachers who want good things, and a manager of those teachers who's a careerist, who cares only about promotion and doesn't care about kids at all. I'm not saying that is *always* true, but it can happen.

And I think there is nothing in the principal-agent framework that prevents us from rethinking the direction we shine the light from, and who the principals and the agents are. If we instead focus on the mission that the principals and the agents are collectively aiming at, and ask the question, “Does it serve the mission? Are you doing things that forward the goals of this agency?” Then I think we can start to ask different questions about who is helping, and who is getting in the way. And if what we're trying to do is help kids, or help those kids in particularly difficult situations to thrive and feel connection, then I think that augurs towards a very different set of answers than the ones our system aims at.

Recentring management practice on the student–teacher relationship

YUE-YI

Well, let's get wholeheartedly into the “*how*” of reorienting systemwide norms. And, of course, we'd like to learn more from you, Sharath, about some of the work with STiR you've already described, but here's something to just sharpen the challenge. One thing we think about a lot at RISE is just how many competing priorities teachers have, many of which are legitimate, for different reasons—and also just how multifaceted human beings are. Like, for example, I know teachers who felt tremendously fired up when listening to or singing the song “Kami guru Malaysia”—“We are the teachers of Malaysia”—but, on the other hand, in their day-to-day work they're somewhat jaded, just out of emotional self-defence from years and years of being stuck in a dysfunctional system.

Besides these multiple legitimate priorities and facets, another part of this challenge is shifting at the system level. At the get-go, we spoke about people who sort of buck the trend of the system. But are there ways we can shift norms at the system level? So, thoughts?

SHARATH

I was just thinking more about what Dan has said on starting with the agent's view first, and riffing on the idea he mentioned earlier about the deviant. Agents are the people most connected to the beneficiary. Teachers are most connected to the child, ultimately. They're the people they see every day. And of course there are challenges with social distance, because many teachers are from different communities and income strata from the kids they're teaching. But if you set that aside, we can assume that there is a benevolence there, and they want to do the best for the child.

So how can the system take that agent-oriented thinking and, rather than using a managerial approach or incentivising approach, could there be a motivating and nurturing approach instead? Could the system say, “Look, our role is to ensure that each teacher is really there to have the maximum potential performance and engagement with the child.” And then, with that goal in mind, saying, “What can we do to help the teacher be most effective?” I really agree with Dan about how there is often the assumption that teachers are bad people. And everything is done very much with that view that we're trying to constrain bad behaviour, instead of assuming teachers are basically good and saying, “How do we help you reach your potential and stay motivated in that?”

DAN

I couldn't agree more. And, in fact, I often say that the basic problem with the current approach is that we have in mind how to minimise the damage the worst actor does. And it is true that our system may minimise the damage of the worst actor, but it does so at the cost of preventing better actors from doing things that would be good. And it also does so at the cost of building an environment that often leads the people who care the most to want to leave the job because they realise this is not where they can get the most done. You know, "I wanted to become a teacher because I care about the kids, but I realised that I actually can't do much about that in this job. And so maybe I'll do something else. If I'm going to do a job where I feel I'm ineffective, well, I could make a lot more money doing it doing something else." Because people are, as you say, multifaceted; they care about multiple things. And being a person who is, in my language, mission-driven, and caring about the purpose of the organisation need not mean you're willing to sacrifice on all other things.

So how do we make the system better? I will try to give a short version of my answer to this, as I am literally in the middle of writing a book which at least purports to be about this. And I very much think that you do it by shifting the system towards a logic of trust and support. To which you might reasonably say, "Great, Dan, that sounds good. How do we actually do that?" So let me say a few things about how you might do that. First, you can directly change management practice, right? There's good empirical evidence—some of which is mine, some from other people—which suggests the value of altering management practice in ways that give more space, as Sharath was just talking about; that give better feedback; that build psychological safety and trust. And the evidence suggests that these alterations have a direct effect on people who are already in the job in terms of the kinds of motivation they feel. And while I can't measure it, I believe that this is happening at a collective level, that motivation is a team game. And that norms are shifting.

But of course norms don't shift quickly. It's not like, "Oh, great, we had a training session, now we have a new norm." That is the wrong way of thinking about norms, but they do shift—even if slowly, and on the margin—and they shift when enough people's minds shift on an individual level, and we get to a tipping point. That's what it means for the collective to shift.

And how can we get the system to embrace that logic? Which was your question. You know, we were talking about the invisible thread, which is a wonderful metaphor that I've never thought about before. So how do we make the thread a little bit more visible? One way of making the thread visible is thinking about the things that happen when that thread is present, but not when that thread is absent, and making those more visible to the rest of the system? Another way we can make that thread visible is by changing how we assess whether the thread is there. It's not my claim—and I'm pretty sure it's not Sharath's claim, though correct me if I'm wrong—that only the teacher could possibly figure out if they have a connection to the child. If another teacher is sitting in the same classroom, they could see the same thing. So if the question is, "Is

For related observations on how managerial norms should be oriented toward the trustworthy majority rather than the irresponsible few, see interlocutor Mike Hobbiss' remarks in [Chapter 14](#) and interlocutor Lucy Crehan's closing thought in [Chapter 6](#).

For a working paper that will be incorporated as a chapter in Dan's forthcoming book on *Mission Driven Bureaucrats*, see Honig, D. (2022). *Managing for Motivation as Public Performance Improvement Strategy in Education & Far Beyond* (CID Faculty Working Paper No. 409). Center for International Development at Harvard University. <https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/publications/managing-motivation-public-performance-improvement-strategy-education-far-beyond>.

this teacher nurturing?”, then that is assessable. It’s just not assessable through test scores or performance reports. And it is much more transaction-intensive to assess. But if we wanted to see how we were doing with this new management practice, that’s something we could do.

Ultimately, I think systems change on a systemwide scale in one of two ways. Either (a) because there is broad recognition by stakeholders that the way the system is currently working is broken, and people say, “Okay, we have to do something else. Here’s an idea. Let’s try that.” And we get lots of people pushing in the same direction. Or (b) when a group of people, including people closer to the point of service delivery, engage in collective action, and say, “We, the teachers, are not happy with this school. We do not think that the system helps us be good teachers, and we want to try something different.” And the system decides to listen. That’s a risky thing for people to engage in, but it’s not impossible.

You know, we see norms changing in our society all the time. We have a world that in the last few years has changed radically in its tolerance for inappropriate behaviours in the personal and professional realm in ways that I think is extremely laudable. I don’t see any reason why these other professional norms would be unshiftable. I just think we need to focus attention on it. And that’s why I think it’s wonderful that you’re doing this project, because it’s work like this that makes these issues more salient. We have a problem here. And let’s figure out ways to make it better.

Possibilities and problems with measuring process indicators

SHARATH

More and more I feel like that engagement is the key proxy. So I think what Dan was saying about making things visible is about process indicators. The usual way we think is always weighted towards outcome indicators. Process indicators are usually seen as sort of fluffy or soft—and they’re intensive to measure. The whole argument of my book is: let’s focus on the process indicators, with the view that the outcomes will come as a result of that.

Look at foundational literacy and numeracy. Of course, early literacy and numeracy are critical; almost no academic learning is possible without it. But if you’re focusing on outcomes in a very crude way, which I think has basically happened in so many parts of the world, you’re not going to build the intermediate skills around curiosity, critical thinking, understanding, communication—all of these things that are so important more broadly. Instead, we could really focus on, “Is that child actually engaging with the teacher?” So many classrooms in the developing world are one-man shows with almost no interaction or relationship. If the one goal could be whether the teacher is engaged in a process with the child, then I think a lot of the other stuff will flow

naturally. So we could measure things in a very simple way to just keep confidence up, but focus on that core connection between the teacher and child?

DAN

As you alluded to earlier, Yue-Yi, I'm not uniquely focused on education. And I can see how we could measure what you're calling process indicators here in education, Sharath. But I don't normally talk about measurement as a general solution, because I worry that our system of measurement will just try to substitute for the process itself. And in some domains, it's not true that there are process indicators that are observable, unlike how in education you have classrooms to visit and things to see. You know, when Yue-Yi wrote and suggested joining you and me up for this conversation, I said, "I'm really interested in that, in part because I think we agree *almost* entirely, but not entirely." And I am less sanguine on the idea that we will get to change by shifting towards the process—I have yet to read the book, which is a loss on my part that I will correct soon. I worry about areas, like development aid, where process indicators have allowed us to say, "We've completed things," but these are things that meet the measure, but not the point. And I think there's a risk there. So it depends exactly what we end up calling "process".

At the risk of sounding like a logic-chopping academic for a second, the reason I use the word "assessment" rather than "measurement" is because I think there's often a way we're going to be able to figure out the things that matter to meet that point, but I don't know that we're always going to be able to give it a score. But I do agree with you entirely—and I'm a little bit surprised that we both hold this view, but I think it's great—that the things that matter are very often observable. It's just a question of how we get there.

And maybe this moves in a different direction, but I also think we need to be aware that our mental model of the teacher in this conversation has been a particular teacher and the management practice or norms or system that they face today. But in 30 years, if that classroom still exists, then that teacher will be different—it will be somebody who entered in the last 30 years.

It's like the Ship of Theseus, right? There's this idea from Aristotle and others where, basically, wooden planks on the ship go bad, they get tossed overboard, they each get replaced; and we still call it the same ship, even when all its pieces of wood are entirely new. Aristotle takes that in a direction that's not relevant here, but what I want to point out is that the ship is going to be renewed over and over and over again. And so when we think about shifting norms, we should engage in the process of figuring out which planks leave, and why, and which planks come in, and why. Of course, if we can change the system now, that is fantastic. But another complementary route that will almost always be available—even when changing today's teacher or today's Child Protective Services officer or health worker is not an available route—is thinking about who is coming in, how they're selected, how they're trained, how they're nurtured.

One of the reasons I am so interested in things like fast-stream civil service programmes and other new ways of bringing in talent to a sector is not because I think the people who work there are bad or lazy or necessarily need replacement—I do not—but because I think these are wonderful vectors for changing norms. Because these new entrants are a group of people who can reinforce each other’s way of seeing the world. One deviant is a deviant. But if a whole team works differently, then that’s moving from the individual to the collective level, even if at a small scale, and that is another way building toward bigger-scale change.

SHARATH

I agree with Dan. When I say process indicators, I wasn’t thinking about the mechanical ones. Maybe the better term would be something like a spirit indicator. And of course the isomorphic mimicry problem that Lant highlights is always there. Also, indicators can just become meaningless. You can go into a classroom and look at kids saying something and you tick a box—but that’s not what we’re talking about. How do you create something that allows you to get a sense of what’s really happening in the classroom? Not because it’s a big deal for the teacher, because they’re in there every day; but more because it gives the system enough confidence to, basically, leave people alone and believe in them and not try to rush in and interfere.

Another thing that we could try to do—in addition to thinking about how to bring in new blood, which is a really good idea, Dan—is to have a conversation with parents and employers. Because the world is becoming more and more “wicked”—more complex and less technically straightforward—in the way we’re moving towards the human sides at work, but even in this country our conversation about education is Victorian. So we’ve diverged from the world of work. When I talk to employees in this building, they only care about the human skills. Yes, they want some very basic academic things, but, really, it’s these human pieces that are going to be important and that won’t be automated. But I think what’s happening that parents are very confused. I was thinking about Singapore, given your background, Yue-Yi. When they tried to eliminate the very, very tough exams that children take at age 11, parents were the ones who pushed back.

So there’s this question of what the world looks like, and this need to link education to a broader purpose and national vision. This is one of the other themes in the book. And having that shared purpose around what the world is going to look like and what children need for it, and sharing that together as teachers, educators, employers, parents—I think that could really create more space for the bureaucrats to, in turn, give that space for teachers to create that horizontal support and trust that you talked about.

On isomorphic mimicry, see Pritchett, L. (2014). The risks to education systems from design mismatch and global isomorphism: Concepts, with examples from India (WIDER Working Paper). UNU-WIDER. <https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2014/760-8>.

The building where conversation occurred was Second Home Spitalfields. Second Home is a co-working space that aims to actively nurture the enterprises and employees that it houses. See <https://secondhome.io/our-purpose/>.

Hierarchy and autonomy in the teaching profession

YUE-YI

One challenge here is that when you take away the source of validation that everyone's used to—whether that's a primary school leaving exam, or some performance review score—if you don't replace it with another source of validation, then people can feel lost. And teaching is often part of a massive, hierarchical bureaucracy. So if we choose to value interactions, to value invisible threads, then that's a very different kind of validation from the standardised measurement approach. So if we want to talk about bringing in sufficient trust so that people instead allow human judgement in observing, in what Dan and Lant have called a “thick” way, whether the right sorts of interactions are happening, then you need school principals to trust teachers, but you also need district offices to trust principals, and state officials to trust their district subordinates, and all the way up the chain. Do you have thoughts on how we can get there? I'm hoping for magical beans, but I know they probably don't exist.

Honig, D., & Pritchett, L. (2019). The Limits of Accounting-Based Accountability in Education (and Far Beyond): Why More Accounting Will Rarely Solve Accountability Problems. RISE Working Paper 19/030. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2019/030.

DAN

There's an American expression, “Shit rolls downhill.” And, in my view, trust does too. That is to say, if somebody at the pinnacle trust their deputies, then their deputies have the space to trust their own deputies. But of course those deputies might not. And if that's the level where trust stops rolling downhill, then from there onward, it's a lot harder for everyone in the system to work in this supportive management style, which in my work is called Route Y.

I find it interesting that you describe education as hierarchical. And certainly there's a sense in which every system has a hierarchy. But the logic of hierarchy, for an organisational economist, is that people want to be promoted; invoking hierarchy to an economist brings in this idea of, like, career concerns, and moving up the ladder, and satisfying your bosses because you want their job. And what's interesting to me about education systems is that this isn't necessarily true; my perception is most teachers do not want the jobs of their bosses, right?

YUE-YI

Well, the ones who really enjoy teaching don't usually want the jobs of their bosses. The ones who do are perhaps the ones that the bosses should worry about.

SHARATH

But the reality is that very few can be promoted, even if they want to be, so that's not really a big concern.

DAN

So I guess that means that we should think differently about this hierarchy. I think our tools—or at least the tools of the academic literature that I know best—are not well-suited to think of this as a hierarchy. And I'm pushing on this point because it opens up a set of solutions that we might otherwise miss. If we're not fundamentally in competition with each other at level X, then there's nothing to prevent us from all trusting each other. So if we ask the question of: how can we change what I might call the basis of accountability? And Sharath's idea of invoking broader stakeholders like parents, and changing a broader social mindset, is right.

My son currently goes to a Waldorf school. And the way accountability works in Waldorf school is that it is a long-term relationship between the teacher and the child. In fact, the teacher moves with the child year on year, so that you stay in the same class even when you go up a grade. So for accountability, there's no reporting up, because reporting is all—and this might be for better or worse—but it's all about the relationship between the parents and the child and the teacher.

And I don't think there's anything inherent about a public education system that would preclude this from happening in a public school if it was sufficiently demanded by, say, the parents at the school. But I think we can trick ourselves into thinking that we need to eat the whole meal at once. And of course, if we change things at the level of the philosophy of the whole school system, that would be great. But I don't think that's the only way.

SHARATH

To build on that, I think that teachers have a lot more autonomy than we often think they do. Even if you could put a video recorder in every classroom, who's going to monitor that video? The cost would be huge, so, luckily, this Orwellian fantasy is never going to happen.

So the idea is that teachers have a lot of freedom. So I think it's a matter of really reorienting their purpose from, as you said, upward accountability to thinking about the child, and focusing on engagement with the child. And it's a question of how we can do that in a way that is really purposeful and productive and gives enough basic accountability as reassurance for the system to trust that it will work. If we did those, a lot could happen that would, I think, boost things like foundational learning quite strongly, but also have many other effects. There would be genuine learning happening that would actually help kids and would be useful for the world, rather than this rote learning nonsense that's the mainstream in most schools today.

YUE-YI

Before I pose the final question, there's just one point that I can't resist sharing. From Yamini Aiyar's and her co-authors' Delhi study that Dan mentioned earlier, one very interesting pair of observations was that a lot of teachers said felt like they had

become primarily secretaries or administrators, but also that when the team actually did time-use research, they spent about one-third of their time on admin. And that's a very large proportion, and it's higher than it should be, but it's also a lot less than 50 percent. But it affected teachers' self-perceptions and really reframed their understanding of what they're supposed to do, to the extent that they felt like admin work was their main task.

Here's the final question: are there any last words that you'd like to leave us with?

SHARATH

Just to reflect on that point about the admin requirements. When I was on the Education Commission, we looked quite a lot at this, and if you look at the things teachers are often expected to do—election duty, vaccination campaigns—all these things are important, but I think a lot of these challenges would be helped if the school could be seen more as a team. So who are the other resources that could take on more of the teachers' piece of these tasks? More broadly, though, there's question of, is there a way that we could make sure those admin things don't deflect from the core role?

I speak to teachers in this country who spend hours a week entering data into Excel. Which is such a crazy thing, because it could be automated. And they never see the results of that data entry. So if they saw it and could use it intelligently, then at least that would be purpose-enhancing, rather than purpose-distracting. That's just one distinction.

Changing norms, perceptions, and cultures

DAN

Yes, I totally agree with that. I think you're right in suggesting that the extent to which administrative-ness—and what some people might call red tape—becomes part of the identity of a profession is correlated with the amount of red tape that there is, but it's only weakly correlated. And that is a good open question that people should be thinking about, and there's actually a bigger, more foundational research idea in there about in that perception, et cetera. But none of that has to do with teachers or norms exclusively.

I guess my final thought on norms would pull a little bit from this wonderful book called *Norms in the Wild*. So we often have this view that people have a certain type, right? Certainly in economics, that's the classic way of modelling: there are good people and bad people. But I believe it was Dolly Parton, who said, "Some of us are saints. Some of us are sinners. For all the rest of us, it sure does depend." And I think that's true. And I think that applies not just to individuals, but it also applies to norms. So I think it is wonderful that we are starting to think about norms, but we should not make the same mistake about norms that we make about people.

The actual figure was that teachers spend 36 percent of their time on non-teaching tasks. See p. 21 in Aiyar, Y., Davis, V., Govindan, G. and Kapoor, T. 2021. *Rewriting the Grammar of the Education System: Delhi's Education Reform (A Tale of Creative Resistance and Creative Disruption)*. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE). https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-Misc_2021/01. For the full time-use survey, see Davis, V., Singh, A., Kapoor, T., & Mathew, D. (2019). Report on Time Allocation and Work Perceptions of Teachers: A look inside Delhi's Government and Municipal Schools. Accountability Initiative, Centre for Policy Research. <https://accountabilityindia.in/publication/report-on-time-allocation-and-work-perceptions-of-teachers/>. For a conversation between Yamini and fellow interlocutor Soufia Siddiqi, see Chapter 8.

Bicchieri, C. (2017). *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. Oxford University Press.

That is to say, norms exist. And norms might appear fixed: at a certain place and time, if we go in and measure norms and assess them, then we're going to find that they're different from each other, and that they predict important things. But norms, ultimately, are a kind of collective belief about each other's collective beliefs, right? Or something like that. There must be better definitions than that. But what I mean to point towards is that they are mutable. And they're mutable if enough of the people who are affected by a norm change that norm. In fact, they change all the time. And I think setting them out on a whiteboard is extremely important in thinking about how to change things at any kind of scale, but we should not make the mistake of then making them seem fixed rather than things that can be influenced.

Thinking about changing norms is a little bit scary, because it has a kind of paternalism built into it, right? It's like someone external is changing the norms of some other place. But I think the logic of our argument is that for the purposes of creating rewarding jobs, for teachers who create valuable educational experiences for students, there are such things as better or worse norms. And we do, in fact, want the better ones. I think we should own that—even though I also think that's a message that should rightly get pushback. And I hope we get to have that conversation, and then start thinking about how we change norms for the better. I really, I really enjoyed thinking about this for an hour, and I really appreciate you bringing it to the table.

SHARATH

Just building on that, we have the idea of culture, right? I think we haven't used that word very much in international development recently. But if you look at what's happening in the corporate world now, organisational culture is becoming very important. And it's very hard, you can't do RCTs on it. But development has this tradition of anthropologists coming in and using that cultural lens. So can we move from norms to actually think how do you shift cultures? That's been almost a no-go topic, because there have been issues about imperialism, especially with donors coming in. But could they create the space for those systems to go through that cultural change process? And we *can* create cultural change. So I'm very optimistic, but I think wonder if that toolkit is one we need to think about much more, about looking at motivation with that lens of organisational culture as the entry point.

DAN

I couldn't agree more with that. In fact, I've taught my students for years—and they may not agree with this, but my view is that development is a process of cultural change. When we say that we want to change how things are done regarding female genital mutilation or girls' access to education or health practices, those are all cultural change. And the fact that we've ignored the word does us a disservice. Even as it rightly raises questions about who gets to decide what's right, that's absolutely a debate we should have.

CHAPTER 5

On informal norms, school culture, and why we need to change mindsets (including our own)

Margarita Gómez & Wendy Kopp

Margarita Gómez is the Founder and former Executive Director of the People in Government Lab (PeopleGov) at Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government. PeopleGov aims to improve the motivation, responsiveness, and effectiveness of people working in government. Margarita has more than 15 years of experience working to build better governments and to design more effective public policies. Throughout her career, she has blended practice and theory, in both academia and the public sector. Previously, Margarita founded and led the first Behavioural Unit in Mexico and served as principal advisor to the Minister of Public Safety and Ministry of Defence in Mexico.



Wendy Kopp is CEO and Co-founder of Teach For All, a global network of independent organisations in more than 60 countries that are working to develop collective leadership to ensure all children have the opportunity to fulfill their potential. Prior to launching Teach For All in 2007, Wendy founded and led Teach For America for 24 years. Wendy holds a bachelor's degree from Princeton University as well as honorary doctorate degrees from 15 universities. She has been recognised with numerous awards including the Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship and the Schwab Foundation's Outstanding Social Entrepreneur Award.



This conversation took place on 19 October 2021.

MARGARITA

Before we start, I would just like to dig a little deeper into your understanding of norms. Here in the People in Government Lab, we have discussions about formal norms, informal norms, behaviours, and so on. So in this conversation, when you say

See <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-programmes/people-government-lab>.

“norms”, are you talking more about social norms, which are informal but reflect how people behave, or are you talking more about formal rules?

YUE-YI

Thanks, that’s a really important clarification. I’m going very broad with this conceptualisation. And I chose to use the word “norms” partly because it can both formal or social and informal. It’s also a word that intuitively makes sense to a lot of people, including economists when they think about distributions, or, say, people in international relations who think about norms as a complement to formal international laws. So it’s very much both the formal and the informal. And of course the formal and the informal do interact, sometimes in unpredictable ways—and that interaction is also an area of interest in this project. So, basically, and any wisdom that you can share related to a broad notion of norms is welcome. Does that help?

For an example of research on social norms by Margarita and her colleagues, see Hensel, L., Witte, M., Caria, A. S., Fetzner, T., Fiorin, S., Götz, F. M., Gomez, M., Haushofer, J., Ivchenko, A., Kraft-Todd, G., Reutskaja, E., Roth, C., Yoeli, E., & Jachimowicz, J. M. (2022). Global Behaviors, Perceptions, and the Emergence of Social Norms at the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 193, 473–496. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2021.11.015>

The importance of informal norms and of school culture

MARGARITA

Yes, that’s good. Maybe I can just start with a broader point about norms, then. It’s just because I’m going to teach some MPP students next week, and this is part of what I want to teach: this discussion about formal norms and informal norms. And what we have seen when we study public employees’ behaviours is that what matters the most, in general, is the informal norms. Everybody knows what these norms are, but they are not a written down or formalised. So as we are studying public organisations and public employees, we are really emphasising the need to look more at these informal norms that influence the behaviours of public employees in general. And I don’t study teachers, but I think that it might be also the case that informal norms play a big role for them.

For some examples of the influence of informal norms on teacher practice, see the conversation between interlocutors Melanie Ehren and Michael Woolcock in [Chapter 10](#).

YUE-YI

That’s what we seem to be finding also in studies from different RISE countries—that teachers can often parrot back what the official language in the formal policy is, but they might don’t necessarily apply that formal policy in their day-to-day practice, for different legitimate reasons.

See, for example, observations from interlocutor Joan DeJaeghere in [Chapter 3](#) and from interlocutor Mike Hobbiss in [Chapter 14](#). See also interlocutor Luis Crouch’s remarks about the detrimental effects of certain divergences between formal policies and informal norms in [Chapter 12](#).

To move into the interview questions, the first question is: can you tell us about a story, experience, or incident that illustrates how norms among teachers or among public servants or just humans in general can affect behaviour or practice in ways that might not necessarily have been predicted by the formal rules or by economic models? Margarita, an example of some of those informal norms would be great.

Wendy, maybe you have a story you could share about teachers in one of the Teach For All countries.

MARGARITA

One thing that we have seen is that working remotely might create new norms. For example, giving autonomy in letting people decide how many days they want to come back to the office. And this is changing their motivation in a way that is just the opposite of traditional thinking about using financial incentives or other kind of factors to motivate people. So that, for me, could be one example of how these informal norms can influence behaviours in different ways, not just thinking about traditional incentives or formal norms.

YUE-YI

Absolutely.

WENDY

I think norms have so much to do with school culture—the collaboration, the ongoing feedback, the support, the nature of the mission of the school, and how much folks are brought together as a team in pursuit of that mission.

Having seen the importance of the school culture, across so many communities and countries, reinforces for me your point about the importance of norms. Because it's really hard for any single person to overcome the culture in which they are placed. We all know people who do manage to overcome it; and Teach For All is a network of organisations trying to support people who will influence their broader school cultures wherever they find themselves. And yet we see that it's *very* challenging, and that it's just much more attainable and sustainable when you can build a whole culture that fosters a different way of being and of teaching.

See <https://teachforall.org/about>.

YUE-YI

I definitely experienced that during my own time in Teach For Malaysia. I mean, you go in with all these images in your head, from movies and elsewhere, about teachers who magically change the school and students' lives. And maybe I moved the needle in showing my students an authority figure from a different ethnolinguistic background who genuinely liked them and who would joke with them, but I didn't move the needle on, say, shifting their school experience away from an exam-oriented culture. Because, as you say, there are limits what an individual can do, and school culture matters a lot.

WENDY

You know, we try so hard to develop teachers as leaders or, as we say at Teach For All, as collective leaders. And there's a small fraction of network teachers who really do overcome the status quo and create something very different inside their classrooms where you see kids growing and developing and learning at a different pace than we would normally see. And in many of those cases, those teachers have gone on to other roles to work to reshape the larger system because they realise that this is not sustainable. Maybe you could do that for two years; maybe some superheroes could do it throughout a teaching career. But we need to make it easier and more sustainable to have that kind of impact for kids. And that's going to take reshaping of the school environment and ultimately, the school system.

Some of those folks have gone on to create schools, and they've created a different kind of school. When I think back to 30-plus years ago in the US, we could have counted on one hand, maybe, the number of truly transformational schools. And we were writing books and making movies of them, right? These schools were enrolling low-income kids and putting them on a meaningfully different trajectory. And there are hundreds of them all over this country now: schools that have changed the norms about what teachers do; and have made it much easier to be a very dedicated, committed person but not a superhero and to teach in ways that accelerate students' learning and development. These schools set a framework between students and parents and teachers, where everyone is clear on the expectations that they're working towards. And so we've seen not only whole classrooms attain transformational results, but whole schools.

There are also a few systems where we've seen the kind of system changes that have enabled this transformational change to propagate across many, many schools. I was recently talking with an alumnus of Teach For India who works within the Delhi school system that has produced such significant gains in foundational literacy levels. He described the problem they set out to address as the mindset that "a little bit is enough for these children"—just pervasively low expectations—and how they've gone about tackling this by showing what is possible. They invested in and elevated awareness of the most ambitious school leaders. They also focused on the well-being of the teachers—on improving the quality and cleanliness of their restrooms, providing free tea and coffee in every teachers' lounge—with the theory that if they take care of the teachers, they'll take care of the students.

For more on the importance of school-level culture, see remarks from interlocutor Verónica Cabezas in [Chapter 2](#), as well as the discussant essay "The influence of schools in shaping teacher norms" by Sameer Sampat in [Chapter 17](#).

Interactions, mindsets, and a sense of purpose

YUE-YI

Delving into that a bit more into both of those points about school culture and motivational change from remote work, could you talk about "*what*" some of the most

influential norms are that shift the practice of teachers or frontline bureaucrats, in the contexts that you've worked in? What's the range of norms that can affect practice?

MARGARITA

I'm really struggling when you talk about norms in such general terms. If we're talking about frontline service providers, we have their general behaviour, or how they relate to citizens. Then we have also their own individual behaviours, and their relationships with their peers, and their relationships with the system, and so on. So I'm just struggling to understand the approach that you are taking with norms.

YUE-YI

I think you are exactly articulating one of the big struggles of this project, because we recognise that all of those aspects matter. And trying to get both some analytical and some practical traction amid all of those aspects is what this project will ultimately aspire to. So whatever degree of specificity or generality that your thinking has been falling into recently would be helpful as input to this project.

MARGARITA

In that case, I'm going to try to map some of the different norms and interactions that we study when we are trying to understand frontline workers' behaviours or public employees' behaviours. One thing we always look at is the interaction between the frontline employee with citizens when we are talking about public service delivery. So we are really trying to understand how that relationship works: how there is one part of the interaction that is formal, and there is one part that is totally informal, and it all depends on the context and even on the sector. Like if someone is in the health service it might be a little more challenging because people go to hospital or clinics when they need something—usually citizens come to the government because they are claiming some benefits or they need some services.

We also look a lot at the interaction between that public employee with their peers—the social interaction that happens there and, again, what are the rules that cover the interaction. And there are informal rules, but we also study a lot of the managerial practices and how they interact with their managers.

Then we also have the context—the environment, the organisational culture—and how that influences behaviour. And all of these parts can be included in this broader definition of norms.

WENDY

What most comes to my mind is purpose and mindsets. Teachers have different purposes, in different schools and in different places, right? I'm thinking about our work as it relates to equity in education. So there's been a push to say, "Okay, all kids

For one classic analysis of frontline public-sector workers and their interactions with service users, see Lipsky, M. (2010 [1980]). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services* (30th anniversary expanded ed). Russell Sage.

should have equal opportunity,” and that could be a purpose that some teachers have. Which is better than assuming that “These kids only deserve a certain amount or only have a certain amount of potential,” but it’s still not sufficient. Across our network, we’ve historically built norms around working towards equal outcomes by giving more supports, more time, doing whatever it takes. Over the last few years, we’ve worked to shift our purpose towards realizing *different* outcomes. We’re saying: “We need to ensure that kids are developing as leaders who can reshape the world and tackle inequity and tackle injustices.”

And so one of my biggest thoughts right now is just around purpose, because your purpose determines so much about every choice you make in the classroom and in our education systems. I just listened to an interview with the Indonesian Minister of Education, Nadiem Makarim. And I don’t know how it’s playing out on the ground in Indonesia, but at least at the top level, he has such a vision: provide emancipatory education that fosters the development of autonomous, creative, independent problem solvers with courage and integrity. And he shared his strategy for achieving this—by providing educators freedom at every level of the system, thus enabling them to live into this vision themselves as they support their students to do so. Every choice that he and those around him make will be different because they’re rooted in a fundamental purpose that’s different.

We’ve also come to think a lot about mindsets, perspectives, lenses. In our own work, we try to figure out how we can help people to unlearn a set of mindsets or lenses that we’ve internalised from our own schooling and to learn new set of lenses that would be conducive to this broader purpose about the holistic development of students as leaders. And we’ve come to think about four lenses in particular. First, do you see students as whole people and as leaders with the potential to reshape the world? Or do you see them as passive recipients? This mindset can lead to a huge difference in how you act in a classroom. Secondly, seeing teachers as learners who are constantly learning alongside kids, rather than as people who have all the knowledge and should just impart it. Thirdly, seeing community as power—meaning, seeing the strengths in communities and the assets that students and students’ parents and other community members can bring. And that leads to the instinct to work in deep authentic partnership with them, versus thinking there’s something broken about the community. And then, finally, seeing challenges as systemic: really reflecting on the root causes of things that happen in classrooms and schools, and tackling the issues as the systemic challenges that they are rather than as problems within the students themselves.

Looking at this in terms of norms, if you’ve got a bunch of teacher norms that are rooted in the lenses we’re trying to help people to unlearn, then what teachers do on a day-to-day basis will be so, so different from those in settings where the norms are the positive flip side of those lenses.

For more on the role of purpose in education and beyond, see the conversation between interlocutors Dan Honig and Sharath Jeevan in [Chapter 4](#).

MARGARITA

Just adding to that, some of the work that we have done with public employees is moving, I think, in that direction. We constantly ask questions around, “What motivates public employees?” or, “How can we change behaviours of public employees?”

There are three main elements that usually come out, and they all are moving away from the “rational” model. One element is giving purpose to public employees. And the purpose can change—even in one institution, there might be a different purpose for each public employee, and I think that recognising that difference is good. Another element is understanding or finding meaning in the work that they are doing. Then there is this other element of really enjoying the job and getting satisfaction from it, and knowing what impact they are having in a pro-social way. We have seen that as a factor that can influence behaviour or motivate public employees in a different way, compared with the traditional way that we have been thinking about the performance of government and public employees.

YUE-YI

That’s all fascinating, and also quite encouraging to me because at the RISE Directorate we’ve actually been thinking a lot about purpose as being central to aligning systems. So I do recognise that different people within the system would articulate their purpose differently, but when you have all these different levels and different types of relationships and interactions, this leads to complexity. And we’re starting to think about how a sense of shared purpose is one way of achieving some kind of alignment across those differences and amid that complexity. But talking about purpose can sometimes feel like wishy-washy self-help, so the fact that the importance of purpose is resonating across both of your contexts is really encouraging.

Let’s see if we can start weaving in a bit of the “why” question—so, why these different norms emerge and remain, why purpose matters, why school culture is so influential, why frontline interactions vary. So let’s just start bringing in some of the underlying factors and relationships as you continue to explore this thread.

See Kaffenberger, M. (forthcoming). The role of “purpose” in education system outcomes: A conceptual framework and empirical examples. RISE Working Paper Series. See also Hwa, Y.-Y., & Pritchett, L. (2021). *Teacher Careers in Education Systems That Are Coherent for Learning: Choose and Curate Toward Commitment to Capable and Committed Teachers (5Cs)*. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE). https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-Misc_2021/02.

Listening to each other and co-creating shared visions

WENDY

I had gone through a journey where in one era I was feeling that I don’t know how to address teacher practice outside of the context of schools, to the point of now actually thinking that all the hard work that’s going into redesigning schools, in pursuit of transformational outcomes though school culture, is needed because we’re just compensating for the fact that we haven’t done the work we need to do on people development. I think the root cause is, in part, that we all went through a certain

See also Jal Mehta (2013) on how “the entire American educational sector was put together backwards” (p. 269). Mehta, J. (2013). *The allure of order: High hopes, dashed expectations, and the troubled quest to remake American schooling*. Oxford University Press.

education system. So to actually teach in a different way requires unlearning deep-seated lenses and mindsets and all that have been pounded into us for years and years, and then relearning a different set of mindsets.

So that's our current bet: that if we can invest in the deep, conscious leadership development that would enable people to get clear on their purpose and unlearn a set of lenses and relearn a new set of lenses, then maybe we'll have scalable reinvention of education, even beyond school walls. That said, it's always easier to do if you're having constant positive reinforcement from a culture that you're in day to day, and from the other teachers and collaborators in a building. So it will be much easier if we can make this work within any given school. But hopefully, we can also create catalysts who can work to spark that change within schools that haven't yet fully embraced the strong culture and the different purpose.

YUE-YI

Margarita, any thoughts on that—about how people have just been socialised over their lifetimes to interact with government, in ways that affect their practice and performance as government employees themselves?

MARGARITA

I was just thinking more about what we were discussing a couple of minutes ago about why some norms can affect behaviours. There was this experiment in Pakistan, if I'm not wrong, with public employees, and they were just put together in groups to discuss the mission and the vision of the agency where they were working. And the study found that there are two factors that were important for the positive effect of this intervention.

What the study found is that just the fact that the public employees were rethinking about the “*why*”, about the purpose of the work they were doing, this made them feel more connected to their work and to find more meaning in it. I think that's connected with the purpose and intrinsic motivation that you were mentioning. And the other factor is the fact that they were listened to by the institution, about what they thought the mission of the agency was. So I just was thinking about why some things can change behaviour, and I think that there is a role that is played by intrinsic motivation, and there is also the social interaction that impacts motivation.

YUE-YI

Wendy, out of curiosity, would you see that example Margarita mentioned—this experiment where they got public servants together to talk about the organisational mission—as an instance of unlearning and relearning in practice?

For examples of related experiments, see Khan, M.Y. (2021) Mission motivation and public sector performance: Experimental evidence from Pakistan. Manuscript in preparation. https://y-khan.github.io/yasirkhan.org/muhammadyasirkhan_jmp.pdf. Salamone, A., & Lordan, G. (2022). Can Meaning Make Cents? Making the Meaning of Work Salient for US Manufacturing Workers (IZA Discussion Paper No. 15183). Institute of Labor Economics (IZA). <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/15183/imprint>.

For more on intrinsic motivation, see the interview with interlocutors Sharath Jeevan and Dan Honig in Chapter 4.

WENDY

Yes, totally. I've said many times that if I could start this whole endeavour of ours over again, I would begin by putting at the centre of the work in any given community—because our network partner organisations cluster their teachers within geographic regions—an effort to co-create a vision of student success, which is essentially the purpose. Meaning, we would first bring all the stakeholders together around the question of: “What are we working towards? By the time our kids are young adults, what do we want to be true?” In a way that is rooted in local context, culture, history, values, and in an understanding of the pathways to opportunity and the actual challenges facing kids, and is also informed by our global aspirations.

Because if we could work in communities with parents, teacher, other educators, students, and other highly respected community leaders to develop those visions, this is the foundation of true partnership and working together, and then everything else can flow from there. Every decision about how we support teachers, what we're working towards for kids, how we're assessing progress. So I think it's just so completely central to achieving the system change that we need.

Beyond teachers in classrooms, if we're thinking about getting whole systems to the point where kids are learning and developing, then without the shared vision and purpose that is developed in a local context, you just have people assuming that they're all working towards the same thing, but they're actually not.

MARGARITA

Bringing in another example from our learning, in the last month we've been doing a study and talking a lot with public employees. One thing from this study that is connected to your point, Wendy, is that in some countries that have responded well to the COVID challenge, they have recognised that they don't have all the answers. So they have this humble attitude about being a public employer or working in government, where they can say that they don't know. They have also called citizens and other partners to co-create solutions, to think about, “How can we deliver better public services?”

And that is totally changing the way the public employees were looking at themselves. Because usually it's like, “No, we need to have an answer, we need to be very responsible, we need to say that we know how to resolve this problem.” And here's a change of mindset, as Wendy was saying, which is instead like, “No, let's go and ask for help in order to respond to this crisis.”

YUE-YI

There are so many complementarities between what both of you are saying. Also, just to flag, we're well into discussing the “*how*”, which is approaches for reorienting teacher norms for systemwide improvement. As we keep exploring this “*how*”, it would be great if you could both give a few more examples that you have come across along

For more on the importance of educational ideals that align with community priorities, see remarks from interlocutor Masooda Bano in [Chapter 9](#) and from interlocutor Soufia Siddiqi in [Chapter 8](#).

See Ali, A. J., Calderón, L. Á. Á., Riccetto, P. A., Carpio, P. del, Nouchi, E. E., Fuenzalida, J., Gómez, M., Hein, A., Molina, O., & Williams, M. (2022). Questioning hierarchies: Senior leaders' views on how global civil services changed during the pandemic. People in Government Lab, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford. <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/publications/questioning-hierarchies-senior-leaders-views-how-global-civil-services>.

For related observations on how the COVID pandemic may broaden collaborations and visions in education, see the exchange between interlocutors Laura Savage and Carlos Vargas Tamez in [Chapter 15](#).

the way. Margarita, I know you've done some very interesting work with different kinds of nudges, both in selection of public servants and in practice. And Wendy, of course, you've seen so many examples on the ground across dozens of countries that have these incremental but really profound changes. So, other thoughts about how to reorient norms?

Changing mindsets and changing structures

WENDY

There's growing research about what happens to the people who participate in Teach For All programmes, which use regression discontinuity analysis to look at people who are right on the admissions line, and some get into, say, Teach for India or Teach for America, and some don't get in. And if you look at the difference in their mindsets, their beliefs, et cetera, two or five years later, these studies have shown such consistent effects even across very diverse contexts around the world. First of all, people in these programmes *really* grow in their sense of possibility, including in their belief in the potential of the kids and communities in which they work. They come in believing in this potential more than the people who weren't accepted, but that gap grows wider.

Another change that I think is super important is many people go into the programmes thinking that technical solutions like more funding are the answer to the problem of educational inequity. Not that we don't need more funding, but the participants come out thinking that this is a very complex, adaptive, systemic challenge. So I think we've seen that we can shape these mindsets through intense, sustained proximity to students and families in communities, along with intensive professional development: coaching, opportunities for reflection, being part of cohorts where people are supporting each other.

Over time, we've learned how important it is in teacher professional development programmes to focus directly on mindset development. To this point, I was just thinking about an early experience in Teach For All. Teach For India looked at Teach For America's approach to training and supporting teachers, and they said, "We're going to take this approach that is 90 percent about developing skills and knowledge and 10 percent working on mindsets, and we're going to make it 60 percent skills and knowledge and 40 percent mindsets." I'm making up those percentages, but they really shifted the balance to mindset development. And so, for example, one day they would have their fellows work alongside the parents of the kids whom they were going to be working with. And then the teaching fellows would reflect on that experience, and among other things it deepened their understanding of the challenges facing students and families, and of the stakes of their work. Or they sent them out in the community

with no resources at all and gave them a big task, which fostered this deep sense of possibility about what they could accomplish.

When I visited Teach for India a year into the programme—because we were on this mission across Teach For All to grow the percentage of transformational teachers who are truly helping kids onto a different path to be the transformational leaders of the system—I realised that Teach For India had more of these transformational teachers percentage-wise than Teach For America did, and so Teach For America’s whole training team went over to see what are they doing. So just recognizing the power of mindset development is a huge part of the puzzle.

For another example of the role of teacher mindsets in transformational schools, see interlocutor Michael Woolcock’s description of an extraordinary school in Palestine in [Chapter 10](#).

YUE-YI

Thanks, Wendy. Margarita, any thoughts?

MARGARITA

Yes, I’m thinking about the “*how*”, about how can we change these norms? And I just think that different moments of change can matter for public employees. Now we are in a great moment to change a lot of things, because we have a crisis—we have an external element changing the way that we are working—and this is a great moment to think differently about incentives. Thinking about what are the other incentives that we can put in place that are very connected with what makes public service important and relevant; thinking about this intrinsic motivation that we haven’t been paying attention to, and putting that at the centre of designing policies to increase performance of our public employees.

And we have seen, for example, that in general, for different public services, that it’s important to make them more attractive places to work. Now it is likely that a lot of people won’t want to work in government if we go back to working in offices full-time. So how could you really design different incentives to attract better people to public employers, and how can we also identify some motivators that help people to perform better?

YUE-YI

Thanks for that. To probe a little bit, I’d be curious to hear from both of you about whether you have any reflections on, when it comes to approaches for shifting norms, how can we tell which approaches are broad, cross-context translatable principles, versus which approaches are context-specific and locally rooted?

MARGARITA

I’m going to bring here perspective of the behavioural scientist that I am. I think that there are a lot of things connected with intrinsic motivation, a lot of things that drive human behaviour, that we can compare and that we can use in different countries. For

example, using more social recognition, using meaning and purpose—we know that these matter, and that they will be comparable in different countries. Contexts matter as well. But we know that when we talk about behaviours, these drivers are important whichever place or whichever culture you are coming from.

WENDY

We've just been through this whole process of co-creating, with our network of 60 partners, a new teacher development framework that is essentially about these notions we've been discussing—its starting point is about purpose and lenses, and the actions that flow from that, and then the outcomes that flow from that. And, you know, we haven't been saying, "We're developing the one model that everyone around the world should use," but we're saying, "We are developing a critical mirror that represents the collective thinking of a very diverse network." And that we think it's worthwhile for each of our partners to think about, "How do we contextualise this in our particular context? How do we think about the purpose and the lenses, with this framework as a source of inspiration?" Because we've just seen that every single thing needs to be contextualised. We may say "students as leaders", but that may conjure up a whole bunch of issues in different contexts, so the word "leaders" has got to be contextualised to capture the envisioned spirit of it.

But I do think we've seen—much more so than we anticipated at the start of Teach For All—that across all these countries and massively different cultural contexts, the roots of the issues we're addressing are very similar, so that what students need in their teachers is also more similar than we might have thought. So there's a lot that's similar, *and* there's always need for contextualisation. That's essentially what we've come to think.

YUE-YI

That's very helpful—both of you shared very measured approaches to the issue, recognising universality but counterbalancing that with really strong local awareness.

I'm just going to ask you for any last words you'd like to leave us with. Whether that's thoughts that occurred to you throughout this conversation that you just didn't get a chance to say, or any big-picture reflections. And to give you a moment to think about that, I'm going to reflect back to you what, for me, has been one of the really big themes of this conversation. And that's just how important and valuable human subjectivity and agency are in all of this. Whether at the individual level—what someone's mindset is, how they perceive themselves, their service recipients or students, their communities—or at the collective level, when we were talking about the value of shared reflections on purpose and of co-creation and of the strength of informal norms, to go right back to the start of the conversation. So this conversation has really highlighted, for me, how important the human being is. Which might sound like a superficial thing to say, but I think does sometimes get lost in conversations about policy.

For more on how context does—and does not—affect the drivers of intrinsic motivation, see Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). The Darker and Brighter Sides of Human Existence: Basic Psychological Needs as a Unifying Concept. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 319–338. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_03.

On culture and motivation in educational settings, see King, R. B., & McInerney, D. M. (2016). Culture and Motivation: The Road Travelled and the Way Ahead. In K. R. Wentzel & D. B. Miele (Eds.), *Handbook of Motivation at School* (2nd edition, pp. 287–311). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315773384-21>.

So that was one of my big reflections on this. Any last words from either of you?

Shifting norms by challenging our own narratives and supporting change agents

MARGARITA

I was just reflecting that I've been having many of this kind of conversation over the last couple of weeks— thinking about how we can understand public employees' behaviours and improve their performance. And I think that one challenge is: how can we really break our own mindsets, you know, and change the way that we think about public employees, or the way that we think about teachers? How can we break our own siloes?

And I think that we should really take this crisis as an opportunity to rethink the way that we have been thinking, in my case, about public services, and about the role of public employees; to rethink the way that we see public employees, and the way that public employees see themselves as part of society. I don't have a more specific thought, but I am worried that we are just going to be thinking a lot and maybe not really breaking our own mindsets.

WENDY

Those are both such powerful thoughts. We think so much about this question of how we need everyone at every level of a system to exert agency and leadership, if we're going to get where we're trying to go. Achieving this is so much about developing ourselves—unlearning our own limiting beliefs and learning a new set of beliefs—and in turn developing others and ultimately, in our case, the students themselves.

The other thing I'm reflecting on, throughout this discussion, is that I feel like I've watched norm shifts across communities over time. And I'm just reflecting on the power of exposure in enabling that. Meaning that exposure to what's possible—seeing not just one but many examples of something different—that can challenge a community to shift its culture. Gaining global exposure to people who think about the purpose of education in a much different way, in part as a product of whatever their history or culture or circumstances have been, can lead others to realise, "We can rethink our views," and also broadens people's conceptions of, "What directions and purposes are we thinking about?" So with this question of how we foster the evolution of norms, I think so much of it is about how we expose teachers to other communities and other countries, to the range of what's possible.

For related reflections on the potential for changing norms through showcasing exemplars, see [Chapter 14](#) for remarks from interlocutors Alice Cornish and Mike Hobbiss on reference networks, [Chapter 15](#) for remarks from interlocutors Carlos Vargas Tamez and Laura Savage on the value of recognising good practice through the Global Teacher Prize and other awards, and [Chapter 12](#) for remarks from interlocutor Luis Crouch on the power of demonstration.

MARGARITA

I'm just going to add another point. Earlier today I was talking with people from the OECD, and the whole conversation was about, "How can we improve trust in public service?" And it was a lot about how people don't trust public services. I think this also has something to do with narratives. What narrative are we telling ourselves, and what narratives are we presenting to public employees and also to the citizens?

And part of the narrative that we need to change currently is the perception that everything is really, really terrible. Even during this crisis, governments are still working and delivering public services. So there are some things about the way that we present and expose good examples that can change narrative about public services and public employees. I think that this is important, and we have seen that change in narrative also helps to shift norms and behaviours.

WENDY

The one other thing I'm thinking about is the role of change agents in shifting norms. At the core of our work across Teach For All is a theory that if we can get to the point where we have enough change agents—not one transformational leader, but people at every level—that culture can shift. And I've seen that. I've seen whole communities go from a standing start, where people are not even talking about the problem or they don't think it's possible to change anything, to believing that change is possible and having a lot of momentum to change a very entrenched system. So I think we should further explore the role of a critical mass of change agents in shifting norms.

For more on change agents, see discussant essay author Sameer Sampat's reflections in [Chapter 17](#) on norms change catalysed by actors who hold moral authority.

See also the analysis of trendsetters in Bicchieri, C. (2017). *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. Oxford University Press.

CHAPTER 6

On unrealistic curricula, improving teaching amid resource constraints, and the sweet spot between autonomy and support

Lucy Crehan & Katlego Sengadi

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Katlego Sengadi is a Regional Coordinator at Youth Impact (formerly known as Young Love) for the education programme Teaching at The Right Level. She is a passionate youth leader who joined the organisation with 3 years of professional experience under her sleeve. She is a graduate from the University of Botswana, where she studied Sociology and English. She then further completed her Post Graduate Diploma in Education. Prior to Young Love, she had the opportunity to teach English in Botswana and also interned at the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development in Selebi Phikwe.



This conversation took place on 28 October 2021.

YUE-YI

Can you tell me about a story, experience, or incident that illustrate how norms among teachers can affect their practice in ways that might not have been expected by the formal rules or a policymaker in the central ministry or an economic model? Feel free to jump in, either Kat or Lucy.

LUCY

I can share one, if that's all right, Kat. I've picked the experience that was most obviously outside of my own cultural norms as a teacher from England. I was visiting a school in Japan, and I was being shown around by the principal of the school. We went into the staff room, and there was a teacher who was full-on asleep at his desk, with his head back and his mouth open. And it was a busy staff room with loads of other staff around—it wasn't like he was the only one in there—and he was just having a nap. The headteacher walked past, and just gave him a little glance, and said, "Oh, he's tired because he's been working really long hours."

I spoke to other Japanese people about this later, and they were saying, "Well, that's absolutely normal. Because if he's working really hard, he'll need to sleep. And, actually, that's a sign that he's a good employee, because he's exhausted by all the long hours he's working."

If you look at the data, Japanese teachers work some of the longest hours in the world—or, at least, among the countries that enter TALIS, the Teaching and Learning International Survey. Whether or not that is particularly effective in terms of what we're doing in those hours is a separate question, but long hours are an expectation in Japan, which you see across different professions as well.

Lucy writes about her experiences in Japan and elsewhere in Crehan, L. (2016). *Cleverlands: The secrets behind the success of the world's education superpowers*. Unbound. <https://unbound.com/books/cleverlands/>.

See Figure I.4.12. in OECD. (2019). *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume I): Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners*. OECD Publishing. <https://www.oecd.org/education/talis-2018-results-volume-i-1d0bc92a-en.htm>.

KATLEGO

Should I share mine?

YUE-YI

Yes, please.

Gaps between curricular expectations and novice teachers' realities

KATLEGO

Okay, my story is more of a personal experience of when I first started teaching. You know, as a young teacher, as a young professional, you're thinking, "Okay, I'm going to be innovating. Classes are so boring these days, and I want my class to be fun. I want students to really have fun in my class. And I really want to target all those that are struggling and those that are not struggling, and see how I can best balance those needs."

Unfortunately, when I got to the school, I had so many classes and so many students to deal with that I literally didn't even know how best I could innovate. And I noticed

that everyone was just pushing to get the curriculum going, and no one was thinking about innovations. It was just like, “You need to get this curriculum going, you need to finish these topics by the set time.” We have end-of-month tests that happen in each and every school every month—and so every month, you have a target that you need to get to. Whether your students are progressing quickly or slowly, whether or not they are grasping the concept, it really doesn’t matter. So I immediately felt that pressure, and understood that, “Okay, this could really explain why our classes are so tense. It’s because people are just pushing to get the curriculum going.”

So that was a very shocking experience. Because you come into school with this mindset of what teaching is supposed to look like. But when you get inside the actual classroom, and you face some of the challenges that teachers face, then it becomes more like you need to reach just the minimal bar—“This is what I need to get my students through”—and that’s it.

YUE-YI

That sounds scarily familiar. The phrase that some teachers in Malaysia use is “*kejar silabus*”, which literally means “chasing the syllabus”.

LUCY

Also, another familiar aspect for me is that gap between, on one hand, the expectations that you set for yourself, along with the expectations that are set for you when you do your initial teacher training, and all the talk about innovations and all these exciting things you’re going to do. And then, on the other hand, the reality of what is actually demanded of you when you get to school.

It just makes those expectations impossible—at least, impossible for a new teacher. Maybe some of the most experienced teachers, who’ve taught that same curriculum for many years, are able to reach those heights of really excellent teaching and innovation and everything else. But it’s just not possible for brand new teachers. I think we actually set them up to fail by setting such high expectations for learning and doing everything all at once. And then we’re surprised when loads people drop out of teaching, at least in my context, within the first five years.

KATLEGO

I’m just shocked that this happens in many different contexts. In Botswana, the sad situation is that now teachers don’t drop out. They just become so unmotivated to do anything that they just go to class, do the minimum that is expected of them, and go home, because they can’t quit due to lack of employment, et cetera, et cetera. Most of them actually got into the profession not because they’re passionate about it, but because of a lack of other jobs. So now that becomes like a double demotivator, for a teacher to have to say, “Okay, there’s so much that is expected of me, but I don’t even

For related observations on over-extensive curricula, see the interview with interlocutors Verónica Cabezas and Jessica Holloway in [Chapter 2](#).

For a related experience, see the opening example from interlocutor Juliet Wajega in [Chapter 13](#) on her experience as a teacher at a private school in Uganda. See also similar examples from other contexts as described by interlocutors Maria Teresa Tatto in [Chapter 11](#) and Verónica Cabezas and Jessica Holloway in [Chapter 2](#), as well as remarks from interlocutor Ying-yi Hong in [Chapter 9](#) about ongoing attempts in Hong Kong to shift away from extrinsically driven, exam-oriented classroom climates toward intrinsically driven, creative approaches.

For related observations on unattainable expectations and teacher stress, see interlocutor Mike Hobbiss’ remarks in [Chapter 14](#).

For observations on how the wider job market affects the teaching profession in other, see remarks from interlocutors Belay Hagos and Shintia Revina in [Chapter 7](#), Soufia Siddiqi in [Chapter 8](#), and Melanie Ehren in [Chapter 10](#), among others.

have the time to do that. Plus, I don't like the job that I'm doing." So now the students are the ones that have to suffer.

YUE-YI

I just want to flag that we are already talking about the “*what*” of norms: in the contexts that you've worked in and studied, what are the most influential norms that shaped teacher practice? And some of the norms you've touched on are norms of what classroom teaching is supposed to accomplish. There are also norms about how the teaching profession fits in the wider sphere of occupations and careers available to people—Kat, you touched on that—and wider occupational norms—Lucy, you talked about those super long hours in Japan. So if you'd give more examples of influential norms in these areas, or in other aspects of professional, organisational, social, or whatever norms that affect teachers, that would be great.

The spectrum of teacher autonomy

KATLEGO

I wanted to add one more example when it comes to teachers chasing the curriculum. We also have super high-stakes exams—I'm sure most other countries also have those. And I think one thing about education systems that disadvantages all students is that, for the most part, we have mixed-ability classes. That's what our Teaching at the Right Level programme is trying to deal with. In that you'll have these mixed-ability classes, and as a teacher, you're faced with probably 120 students that you need to teach each and every day. So it becomes very hard for you to target them and know that, “I have these students who are struggling, this is how I can help them.” Even the way the timetable is set up, it becomes a challenge for you to even say, “Today, I mainly want to focus on numeracy; I want to focus on literacy.” Because it's always: now you're teaching agriculture; after an hour, you're now doing math; after an hour, you're doing English.” And not every student is able to process what you're teaching in those 30 minutes or in that hour when you are teaching.

So the fact that we have mixed-ability classes also adds to some of the pressures and expectations that the system has placed on teachers. It's like you're expected to build geniuses, yet you're not even given the space or the opportunity to do that. And that becomes a huge challenge. For the most part, there's pressure on teachers to give results, but without necessarily being given the space to do that.

LUCY

I don't know if this counts as a “*what*”, Yue-Yi, but reflecting on the difference between what Kat described and some of that high-performing systems that do well in PISA, one of the key features of the curricula in these high-performing countries is that they're very focused. So there's less content to get through, which means that you

can spend as long as you need—or maybe not as long as you need, but longer—on each concept, so that the vast majority of the students have the time to at least grasp the basics of that concept. Enough to allow them to understand what you’re doing the following term, for example.

So I think that’s one solution to that problem. I know you can’t click your fingers and instantly change the curriculum, but that’s a key difference in systems where teachers do have the time to teach to teach their students. They don’t actually need to separate the students into classes by ability, because even within a mixed-ability class they have the time to address all of the students’ needs.

YUE-YI

I think one norm implicit in that is empowering teachers with a certain degree of autonomy to be able to make decisions about how much time to spend on what.

LUCY

Yes, definitely.

YUE-YI

And this isn’t necessarily the case in a lot of education systems that expanded rapidly in very bureaucratic ways.

LUCY

This lack of autonomy seems to be true in India, certainly. I took part in a conference with the Delhi government back in January. So I was doing a little bit of research into the situation there, and it seems like the Right to Education Act mandated that teachers have to cover the whole curriculum, but the curricula in many states are overly full. So it’s like the situation that you experienced, Kat. It doesn’t make a difference whether the students have understood or not, you just have to move on to the next thing—and that’s actually mandated in the law, although I believe that it’s changing with the New Education Policy in India.

But you can totally understand why teachers get demotivated, if you can see that the students haven’t understood the material, and yet you can’t actually teach them what they need to know.

KATLEGO

That’s one of the principles that our Teaching at the Right Level focuses on. That is to say, you need to help these students to grasp a concept before you move on to the next one. Because if you’re moving on to the next concept, and student doesn’t get the previous one, then you’re not doing anything. So it’s better to move at the pace of

A recording of Lucy’s keynote address at the Delhi Education Conference 2021 is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBwh9p8Jipk&t=4569s>.

For one analysis of India’s New Education Policy of 2020, see Muralidharan, K., & Singh, A. (2021). India’s new National Education Policy: Evidence and challenges. *Science*, 372(6537), 36–38. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abf6655>. (Open-access version: <https://riseprogramme.org/publications/indias-new-national-education-policy-evidence-and-challenges/>.)

For more on Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), see <https://www.teachingattherightlevel.org/the-tarl-approach/>.

the students, so that, at the end of the day, even if it's a 20- or 30-percent increase, it's better than having no improvement after you were teaching for whole term.

But the pressure to follow the curriculum is one of the gaps that we have in our policies—and we have a lot of subjects. We do everything, basically. So it becomes a lot for the students to grasp *all* of that information and go on to those high-stakes exams that determine whether you're proceeding to the next step or not. But I really appreciate the insight from India. I think it's really good that it's changing.

LUCY

Can I just pick up on this theme of teacher autonomy? Because I think there's a spectrum. On the one hand, teachers having no autonomy and not being able to respond to the needs of students in their class, because they have to get through this huge curriculum. I do think there's an opposite extreme as well—and I'll talk about that, and then I'll come back to the sweet spot.

And the opposite extreme is that you can have too much autonomy, at least in terms of national policy. When there's a blanket policy that gives a large amount of autonomy to all teachers—rather than to certain teachers who have demonstrated that they're able to use autonomy in the best possible way—I think that can be problematic. So, for example, in cases where you have very high-level and non-specific curricula that leave most of the decisions about what content is taught to the teachers, such as New Zealand, I know that many teachers find this overwhelming. Because there's a huge amount of work involved in making good decisions about what content to teach, and the order in which to sequence it, across the needs of children in a whole school. And that's before you've even got to thinking about what's the best way to teach this content.

I think some national policies do this in the name of teacher autonomy, because teacher autonomy sounds good. But what they call teacher autonomy actually is responsibility. So they give a huge amount of responsibility to teachers without necessarily providing the support required for them to make the best decisions. New Zealand and Scotland are both examples of places that have done this. There's also potentially a lack of coherence here, because if teachers are just too busy for the really deep thought required to make those curriculum decisions, you end up with teachers choosing content because that's what they already have the resources for. Not because it's necessarily the most important thing for these children to learn in, say, geography.

In contrast, there's more of a sweet spot in somewhere like Finland—and I'm jumping all over the world here. They have a national core curriculum that's quite high-level, but it's elaborated at the level of the district, where teachers at the district level will come together to plan a district-level curriculum in a bit more detail. But to be honest, even if they didn't do that, there's still a lot more support for Finnish teachers, because they've got high-quality textbooks that most of them use. It's the norm in Finland to use textbooks—there we go, “norm”! And it's not seen as a problematic norm, because

See, for example, Smith, J. (2019). Curriculum coherence and teachers' decision-making in Scottish high school history syllabi. *The Curriculum Journal*, 30(4), 441-463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2019.1647861>.

the textbooks are high-quality, they're motivating for students; they're designed by experienced teachers; they've been trialled in schools. So there's no reason not to use textbooks, and the teacher still has loads of autonomy because they don't have to use the textbooks. They've got a lot of freedom over how they design their school-level curriculum. They've got complete freedom over pedagogy, but they've got that support, from the supporting factors of high-quality textbooks, and a district-based or municipality-based curriculum as well.

For more on teacher autonomy, see (among others) the interview with interlocutors Shwetlena Sabarwal and Joan DeJaeghere in [Chapter 3](#) and the interview with interlocutors Verónica Cabezas and Jessica Holloway in [Chapter 2](#).

Complexity, autonomy, and support in Teaching at the Right Level

KATLEGO

Lucy, when you're talking about that sweet spot, it makes me think about our TaRL programme. I'll keep on referencing it because I think it's a really interesting system. What we do is we train our facilitators, we give them the curriculum, and we give them best practices of what the programme should look like. We also assist them with drawing up a weekly guide to say, "At the end of 15 days, this is my goal. There's my entry point and there's my exit point."

But when they're in the classrooms, they have autonomy on the pacing of the programme, looking at how their students are performing as captured in the data they collect each and every day. And they can move on to the next objective based on that data. But another thing about our system is that the data is not a very strict, formal assessment. We are basically just moving around among the students, looking at the class, and gauging, so we can say, "Okay, I think they've got it, so we can move on."

So I like what you're saying about autonomy, which is that we can't really give teachers too much responsibility to, say, build the curriculum, build objectives, determine what concept supposed to follow what—it'll obviously be too much for them. But if we break it down to best practices, and then within the classroom we give them autonomy to teach based on the pace of their students, I think that would be great.

YUE-YI

As we continue to explore the "*what*" of teacher norms, I want us to also start talking about the "*why*" behind the emergence and persistence of these norms.

To kick us off, I want to point out a "*why*", a reason for the emergence of certain norms that can be implicit in something that Lucy was talking about. So: I think that people who take teacher autonomy too far sometimes do so because they're not fully considering how complex teaching really is. "I'll give you all this freedom, and you'll do fine even if I don't support you." And I think that this misunderstanding of the

complexity of teaching plays into certain misunderstandings of Teaching at the Right Level, where some people who look at some TaRL models and say, “Oh, in India, when they recruited young community members, and they gave them a tiny bit of training, and then the kids learned so much. So the answer is that we should just get untrained but motivated people and throw them in the classroom.”

But that’s really not the reason it works well. The reason it works, besides the fact that the instructors are highly motivated, is that Teaching at the Right Level has such a cohesive set of objectives and practices and materials and lessons to enable people to be able to teach a cohesive set of learning objectives. So this actually recognises the complexity of teaching and thoroughly supports the instructors to deliver it—which involves a very different underlying perception of what teaching involves. And I know that thought was longer than what would be best practice for an interviewer, but I’m really curious to hear what you both think about it.

LUCY

I completely agree that teaching is really complex, and it’s really hard to do. And that point is really interesting. I’m going to try and reflect back what you were saying there to check I’ve understood it. So in that instance, the approach works because it’s enshrining some of that teaching expertise in the curriculum and in the specific teaching practices, training, and books, for that very particular goal of literacy and numeracy, within an expertly crafted programme.

So maybe there’s some wiggle room, depending on the context and depending on the extent to which expert teachers are available. Obviously, the best thing would always be having expert teachers. But if you don’t have enough expert teachers, maybe you can instead share some of that expertise through your structures and processes and your materials. And this can be effective, even though they are not trained teachers?

KATLEGO

What our programme does is that it focuses on basic maths: we teach addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. It’s meant to be fun and engaging. We use teaching methodologies that are very concrete. Basic maths is quite simple, to be honest, because the processes are always more or less the same. If you’re going to work on addition, or if you’re going to work on carry-over division, you know what you need to do. So that simplicity is one thing that has also really helped us.

And, like I said, we have our best practices. In order for us to say you are a full Teaching at the Right Level facilitator, these are some qualities that you need to have—and we train you on those qualities. We believe a lot in practice. So at the start we train facilitators for five days, and then we have a system where we support them extensively when they’re in schools. At first, we support them constantly, and then as time goes on, the support becomes sort of minimal. Because once they have practised

The misunderstanding articulated here is a reductive caricature of the *balsakhi* remedial tutoring version of Teaching at the Right Level. For more on the *balsakhi* model, see <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/balsakhi-remedial-tutoring-vadodara-and-mumbai-india>.

While Young Love’s TaRL programme in Botswana focuses on numeracy, some TaRL programmes in other countries also address foundational literacy. For a full list of TaRL-inspired programmes, see <https://www.teachingattherightlevel.org/tarl-in-action/>.

enough, they are embodying the values and the best practices of the programme. We really believe that everyone can be trained in this model—and, in our context, we have national service participants that are facilitators for TaRL. They're not trained teachers, but we train them using our Teaching at the Right Level model.

LUCY

Thank you. I think that that brings up an interesting question, or maybe a distinction, in terms of autonomy. And the right level of teacher autonomy is going to be a function of how much experience and training the individual has. And, you know, what some countries will do is that they have teacher career structures whereby, when you first start as a teacher, you're following a curriculum that a more experienced teacher has designed. But by the time you've been teaching for 20 years, then perhaps you're helping to design the curriculum for the whole country. So they are recognising that teachers at different stages of their career have different levels of expertise, and they're deciding how much autonomy those teachers should have accordingly.

But to come back to the question I was trying to pose earlier, which is about one way of dealing with a situation in which you don't necessarily have as many expert teachers as you need, which I know is the case in some countries. It sounds like what you're doing with your programme is you're taking some very high-level theory, and you're simplifying it with well-developed curriculum and training materials for facilitators, along the lines of, "If the students do this, then try this. Here are some rules of thumb that you can use." As opposed to them going off and doing a master's in education. And, actually, that works very well in the circumstance.

I suppose, ideally, in every country in the world, every single teacher would have a PhD in pedagogy. But that's clearly never going to be the case. So then the question is: is it good enough to replace some of the more extensive theory-oriented expertise in many different types of teaching with a theory-based and very carefully designed curriculum and "how to"s for teacher practice?

KATLEGO

Based on my experience, and how we have trained our facilitators, I think it has worked really well for us. Because also we see that the more that they interact with the programme, the more that they interact with the kids, the better they actually become at doing it. Sometimes they will even tell us, "No, that's not working for my class, that's not working for my context." So it shows that they're really starting to take full ownership of what they're doing without necessarily having that theoretical background of teacher training or of having that degree or PhD in teaching. This is why we are constantly saying that you don't need to be a trained teacher in order to facilitate a Teaching at the Right Level session.

For some of Lucy's research on teacher career structures, see Crehan, L. (2016). *Exploring the impact of career models on teacher motivation*. UNESCO IIEP. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246252>.

LUCY

Absolutely. So that training and the actual experience of doing it and using the materials in the programme means they become more experienced, and they become more educated through the process of doing it.

That's a model that I've seen in again, in India, with a programme called XSEED. In their model, they design fully fleshed-out lesson plans based on the curricula in various states in India—and across a few different countries, actually—and they do some training with the teachers on how to use them. But the idea is that they're enshrining good pedagogy in those lesson plans. And through teaching this lesson plan, the teachers are then learning about good pedagogy. Because the lesson plan says, "Okay, get your students to talk in pairs about their ideas about this topic, and then share it with the class." That's an instruction that the teacher is able to follow, even if they may not have a great deal of training—and then they can actually see how that is working and how that opens up students' ideas. And, obviously, there's still a huge amount that you can't just put into a lesson plan, because you've got to be able to respond live to how students are doing. But I do think it's quite an interesting model to use lesson materials or curricula as a training model.

See <https://www.info.xseededucation.com/about-us/> and <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/real-issue/xseed-a-class-apart/48419/1>.

Meeting children's needs with balanced pedagogies and better data

YUE-YI

Just to flag that we're well into the "how" already, which is talking about approaches for reorienting teacher norms for systemwide improvement in education. And the family of models we've been talking about, where you really give very good support to teachers, in the form of materials and training and coaching for specific learning objectives, has worked pretty well in a number of resource-constrained countries. Besides TaRL, Lucy mentioned XSEED, which I hadn't heard of and I shall look up. There's also what some people call "structured pedagogy", which colleagues at RTI International have done a lot of work on with the Tusome programme in Kenya and elsewhere.

For more on the Tusome Early Grade Reading Activity in Kenya, see <https://www.rti.org/impact/tusome-improving-early-grade-learning-kenya>.

To tie together some threads in our conversation, one thing we're coming up against is the tension between where we set our expectations and the constraints of reality, right? Like when Lucy talked about resource gaps in teacher expertise in some contexts and whether high-quality support can help to bridge that. Or when Kat said, right at the beginning, that there's just so much content that teachers are expected to cover, and because it's unrealistic, they settle at low baseline expectations for what to teach. When, arguably, the principle they should be following is adapting to children's needs within the specific constraints, whether that looks like personalised support in Finland where most schools have a master's-degree-trained special education

teacher, or after school Teaching at the Right Level lessons to help the large number of kids in a school in Botswana who can't do division.

I'm so sorry for that tangent. Your turn now.

LUCY

I've got a thought on that tangent, if that's okay.

YUE-YI

Go ahead, I'm sure it will relate.

LUCY

So this is very much to do with teacher norms. No one in education can escape the phrase "guide on the side, sage on the stage". I think that there has been a move, in response to an understanding of teachers—which I think is common across many countries at some point in the past—where teachers just stand at the front of the classroom and talk, and don't pay much attention to where the students are. And that is problematic. In response to that, there has been a shift to an idea that good teaching is not chalk-and-talk, but more "guide on the side", where teachers are seen as letting students pursue their own interests, or discovering the information for themselves, with the teacher just kind of wandering around and supporting them.

Perhaps that is too gross an exaggeration. But these ideas are floating around and have been understood in that exaggerated form in many places—which is problematic in itself. Because it's not good to have a teacher who doesn't pay attention to where the students are and just keeps droning on, but neither is it good to expect the students to discover everything for themselves, using whatever materials they have, which in richer countries often means individual laptops.

And I've seen that as a very clear change in teacher norms. I was doing a review of schools in Abu Dhabi, for example. And I went into one classroom where there was a really good lesson. It was a math lesson, and the teacher was modelling how to do a particular procedure in maths. There was lots of interaction because she was asking the children questions and the children were asking her questions, but she was at the front of the classroom, drawing things out on the whiteboard as they went along. We were in that classroom for only about five minutes—and we came out again, the school principal, who was showing me around, said, "Oh no, I'm so sorry about that. She shouldn't have been standing in front of the classroom like that; she should have been letting the kids do more independent work or group work."

I think that's really sad, because it's swung too far in the other direction. And saying the teacher should only be a guide on the side is a problem in any context, let alone in contexts where children maybe don't have a great baseline on understanding

to start with, or where you've got 100 children in the classroom. It doesn't even really work when you've got 18 kids in the classroom, if you look at the international data on these kinds of approaches. So yes, even though that's a tangent, I do think that this conversation would not be complete without some mention of this sometimes tiresome divide of traditional versus progressive, et cetera, et cetera.

KATLEGO

I have some thoughts about support, building on the need to support the teacher in supporting their students. In our context, I think one thing that we lack—and maybe, to a certain extent, that our policymakers lack—is evidence to show the reality of what is happening in the classrooms. Teachers are teaching without really understanding their classes. They don't understand their students. They're just thinking about As, Bs, Cs; “This student is passing, this one is too slow.” But we don't actually know what it is the slower students are struggling with. Maybe they work slowly but they actually understand concepts—but our exams are timed so we don't see their understanding.

Or, for example, we have realised that our TaRL students who are learning division often have the same problem across their schools, which is that many of our teachers have a problem with teaching the long division method. Instead, they use the short method. So our policymakers and teachers do not have the evidence to help them understand that, for these students who are struggling with division, what is it about division that they are struggling with?

So beyond just support for the teachers, one thing that we need to focus on is evidence for action. Collect the evidence and find out how best you can assist these teachers and students, and we can take it from there. Because right now, for the most part, we're just speculating. Teachers, school heads, regional officials, everyone is just speculating to say, “These are our challenges. This is what we're going to do.”

One thing Botswana has that is really good is the Breakthrough programme for early-grade reading. When we were doing our needs assessment at the start of implementing Teaching at the Right Level in Botswana, we realised that most students don't have a problem with reading, but they have a problem with comprehension. But when we go into schools, many people think that the students don't know how to read at all. So that's why, when it comes to the “*how*” of changing teacher norms for student learning, I will just keep on talking about evidence and evidence and evidence for action. If we're able to do really build that evidence, then it would go a long way in knowing how best to support our teaching and learning.

For an early assessment of Breakthrough to Setswana, see Peacock, A., & Morakaladi, M. (1995). Jaanong ke kgona go bala le go kwala: Beginning to evaluate 'Breakthrough' in Botswana. *Research Papers in Education*, 10(3), 401–421. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267152950100308>.

Changing beliefs, building buy-in, and rethinking motivation

YUE-YI

Yes, I think there are real information flow problems within education systems that affect decision-making so much.

But actually, Kat, that makes me reminds me of a different kind of information question that I wanted to ask you about, and which sort of links what Lucy was saying. When my colleague and I visited Young Love in Botswana, then Noam—who is one of the leaders of Young Love, Lucy—said that, “We really want to change classrooms and classroom practice as a whole in the country. But we realised that we need to demonstrate that change is possible, and that teachers don’t necessarily need to just be the sage on the stage at the front all the time.” So they demonstrate the possibility of change by having these energetic, afterschool, unconventional lessons with young facilitators. And when teachers in the school see that this can work with the same students, then you see them adopting little aspects of this practice. Does that sound accurate to you, Kat?

KATLEGO

Yes, that’s really true. What we do now is that when we train facilitators, we also train teachers, who are also expected to implement some of these practices. And I remember one of the teachers was sharing that Teaching at the Right Level has really changed the way that they view their classroom and the way that they view teaching. If I may quote, she said, “Happy teaching equals happy learning.” She was saying that some of the teaching methodologies that she managed to get from Teaching at the Right Level—like behavioural management techniques, teaching techniques—have helped her to see that teaching is not necessarily a teacher standing in front of the students and just bombarding them with information, but actually going down to their level and interacting with them. Like in the role of a friend or aunty, and not necessarily being a huge formal teacher. So those are some of the aspects that have come out of our programming, outside of our core curriculum and the core mandate of Teaching at the Right Level. Those are some of the experiences that we get when we continue to interact with teacher implementers.

LUCY

I think that’s a really powerful way of effecting change because it’s difficult to convince teachers to change their behaviours without changing their beliefs. And one of the sticking points, I think, for teachers hearing about something that’s happening somewhere else is, “Yeah, that might work there. But that won’t work with *my* kids. They don’t understand my context.” So if you can show them, “Actually, we are working

For a contrasting example of a TaRL-inspired intervention where teachers’ perceptions about classroom learning differed from the intervention in ways that contributed to the failure of the programme, see [Chapter 15](#) for interlocutor Laura Savage’s opening observations about her experience in Bangladesh.

with the very same class that you're teaching, and look what is possible," then that's such a powerful way to change those teacher beliefs.

YUE-YI

This conversation has gone in a lot of directions, and it could still go in many other directions. But I want to be respectful of your time, so we're just going to pause for a moment to reflect, and then after that pause, each of you could say any last words that you'd like to leave us with—especially any big thoughts you had about the “*what*”, “*why*”, or “*how*” of teacher norms over the course of this conversation, maybe a thought that you didn't get to say because the conversation went so fast, or that you want to make sure you include in this conversation before we end. Feel free to jump in whenever you're ready.

KATLEGO

Okay, so the big key takeaway that I got out of in this conversation is that teaching as a profession is really complex. And this complexity shows when Lucy was talking about the different contexts that she has worked in. It also shows in the friction between the pressures and expectations that we get from policymakers or ministries, versus what we actually have on the ground. And I see that some countries are trying to maybe streamline and reduce their curriculum, but I would say that in Botswana we still have a very long way to go with maybe trying to cut down on the number of subjects and topics that we have. It seems like syllabus chasing is something that cuts across many countries, and which really negatively impacts the quality of our learning—because what we really want is a full-package learner, if I may put it that way, but our education systems seem to be aimed toward having more theory-based learners.

But I have hope. Here in Botswana, with our Teaching at the Right Level programme, we're hoping that, ultimately, we will have it embedded in the education system. Already we have buy-in from the different regions that we're working with, and also from the Ministry of Basic Education. But Rome wasn't built in one day, and buy-in takes time, and some people are just hearing about the programme and haven't seen it in their regions yet. Sometimes things are not moving as quickly as we would have expected or wanted—but we are moving, and I think that's the most important thing. Those are my last thoughts. Thank you.

YUE-YI

Thank you, that was beautiful. Lucy, all yours.

LUCY

I want to build on what Kat was saying and link it to something that we haven't really talked about yet, but I think is an important part of your initial question of how teacher

For more on changes in beliefs through demonstration effects, see the discussion on trendsetters in Bicchieri, C. (2017). *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. Oxford University Press.

See also remarks from interlocutor Luis Crouch in [Chapter 12](#) on the power of demonstration and from interlocutor Alice Cornish in [Chapter 14](#) on the importance of teachers' reference networks.

norms might lead to behaviours that are a bit different from what prior expectations, or in this case economic models, might predict.

I'm thinking about the area of teacher motivation. Sometimes when policymakers who are not educators want to improve teacher motivation, with rational economic models applied, then things like performance-related pay are floated, where you think, "Well, it must be that if we want teachers to work harder, we need to offer them more money." And I think that what policymakers actually need to do—and of course this may not apply to all contexts—is to look at the situation and say, "Can we just remove the things which are demotivating teachers?" Because many teachers, though not all, either go into teaching because they care about children, or once they're in teaching then they're moved to care about them. But this can only apply fully if it's a job that you feel you are able to do successfully, because you're not overloaded so you actually can do the job expected of you. And then it becomes motivating because you feel that you're doing a good thing. So I wanted to put that thought out there about the different ways of looking at teacher motivation.

This thought is reflective of Herzberg's two-factor theory. See, among other sources, Herzberg, F. (1959). *The motivation to work* (2nd ed.). Wiley; Herzberg, F. (2003, January 1). One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees? *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2003/01/one-more-time-how-do-you-motivate-employees>. For a related discussion, see the interview with Dan Honig and Sharath Jeevan in [Chapter 4](#).

YUE-YI

That's such a valuable thought. Thank you so much to both of you.

LUCY

I just want to say it's been great to hear about the programme, Kat. It sounds very important, and I hope it goes from strength to strength.

KATLEGO

Yes. And with the kind of work that you do, I think it would be worth your while to come and visit us.

LUCY

I would *love* to.

KATLEGO

Wonderful. And it was wonderful to hear how education systems in different contexts work, Lucy. This was great.

CHAPTER 7

On respect, recruitment, unrealistic expectations, and treating teaching as a specialised profession

Belay Hagos Hailu & Shintia Revina

Belay Hagos Hailu is an Associate Professor of Education and Director of the Institute of Educational Research at Addis Ababa University and a member of the RISE Ethiopia country research team. His research areas of interest include educational assessment, teacher education, early childhood education, gifted education, counselling school children, and child protection. Besides, Dr. Belay closely works and teams up with the Ministry of Education and the National Educational Assessment and Examinations Agency. He is also coordinating educational research projects run by the staff of the Institute of Educational Research at Addis Ababa University and has co-authored books and published articles in peer reviewed journals.



Shintia Revina is a researcher at the SMERU Research Institute. At the time of the interview, she was also the Deputy Team Leader of the RISE Indonesia country research team. She holds a doctorate in education from the University of Hong Kong. Her research focuses on teacher policy and its impact on teacher practices and behaviours. She also conducts research on social dimensions of teaching and learning. Her research for RISE Indonesia includes studies on how a pre-service teacher training programme influences the quality of teacher candidates, student learning, and novice teachers' professional identities. Previously, she taught secondary school mathematics and lectured in pre-service teacher education.



This conversation took place on 29 October 2021.

YUE-YI

Can each of you share a story, experience, an incident, or something else you've encountered that illustrates how norms among teachers can affect their behaviour

or practice, in ways that either the formal rules or economic models or just prior expectations might not have predicted?

SHINTIA

I can start with a story. Belay, maybe you haven't heard about our teacher diary study, so here is just a short background for you. So we have this two-year longitudinal study, where we are investigating 16 novice teachers who have taught for less than five years. We follow them for two years, asking them to write a journal entry every other month. And in between, we also interview them by phone to clarify points from their writing. Basically, we asked them to share about their experiences from the job search to their workload during the first year to their challenges, and how they struggle and how they cope.

Yue-Yi, I believe you've read the draft of our working paper, and you might remember that one of our respondents shared a story about feeling ashamed for putting school administration reports ahead of her students' learning. For a long period of time during her first year of teaching, she didn't really prepare for her lessons or provide timely feedback to the students. And the reason behind this was that she had to focus on helping the school to prepare administrative reports for various purposes. Sometimes she even took time during the lessons to do the reports—since they're computer-based reports, she could do it on her laptop while watching her students do their individual work. Ideally, she would help her students when they're practising, like by providing further explanation or just checking on how they are progressing, but she was busy with her own non-teaching-related work.

According to her, the dilemma was coming from the pressure that she got from her school principal, who keep chasing her about the reports because she is a young teacher who is able to work on reports using technology, which is something that older teachers cannot really do. She said that the school principals never asked whether or not students were learning effectively in her classroom, you know—as long as teachers come to the classroom and keep students busy, principals will not raise any concerns. Even when a teacher just sits at her desk while completing the school report, this practice is something acceptable. So what matters to the principal is the reports. Whether or not students are learning in her classroom, that doesn't really matter. And even parents and students themselves would not mind—due to high rates of teacher absenteeism in the past, teachers' physical presence in front of the classroom is already seen as adequate.

All of these norms faced by teachers, especially our young teachers, may not be anticipated by the formal rules. Because in the formal rules, what counts is the time of schooling, not the time spent for real learning; so students are going to school, but not learning. This is what actually happens in our classrooms, Yue-Yi.

Alifa, U., Pramana, R.P., & Revina, S. (2022). A Policy Lens on Becoming a Teacher: A Longitudinal Diary Study of Novice Teacher Professional Identity Formation in Indonesia. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/096. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/096.

YUE-YI

Yes, and I think there are several different norms that you brought up there, one being that administrative work takes priority over learning, which I think we see in lots of countries. Also, different expectations for novice teachers versus more senior teachers, and a norm of low academic expectations from families and communities.

So, Belay, did you have a story you wanted to share, whether something related or completely different?

Personal, sociocultural, and institutional factors shaping teacher norms

BELAY

It's related, actually. This is not a diary study, but we have a study on teacher professional identity, which is shared by 29 member universities in Asia and in Africa. We call it the Africa-Asia Dialogue, and we have a common project on teacher professional identity.

Conceptually, this identity is formulated based on three major constructs. One is a personal definition of being a teacher, the other is a sociocultural definition of being a teacher, and the third is an institutional definition of being a teacher. So a single teacher has a perspective from these three dimensions. Personally, he or she can define herself from a personal point of view. She or he can also define how others are perceiving him being a teacher. And institutionally, the director of the school, as well as the leaders at district level and at the Ministry of Education level, also define what it means to be teacher. Each teacher conceptualises the expectations of these three components, and then they form an identity—and we call that the teacher professional identity. We have developed a measurement tool, which is a quantitative scale for measuring teacher professional identity. And we have also published the indicators of teacher professional identity in a journal.

Historically, respect for teachers was very, very high—maybe because of traditions or religious education—and it used to be that you cannot call a teacher just by their name as such, but you have to attach “Teacher”, like how “Professor” is a prefix to a university professor. Likewise, for teachers in primary and secondary school, they had that title, “Teacher Hailu”, or “Teacher Somebody”. So that shows a kind of respect for teachers in the tradition. Now, this tradition has declined, and teachers are not respected. I can generally say that most teachers do not feel that they are respected professionals. In fact, in our study, we found that about 70 percent of teachers would like to leave the profession and seek alternative engagement.

For more on the Africa-Asia University Dialogue for Educational Development, see: https://cice.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/?page_id=4409.

For more on teachers' professional identity, see Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., & Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20(2), 107–128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2003.07.001>.

Samsudin, M. A., Moen, M. C., Hai, P. T. T., Hagos Hailu, B., Hidayat, A., Ishida, Y., Kusakabe, T., Ozawa, H., Ishak, N. A., Malik, S. A., Ismail, B. M., Owoyemi, T. E., Anangisy, W. A., Mgonda, N. L., Asiiimwe, J. A., & Kyasanku, C. (2021). Indicators for the Measurement of Teachers' Professional Identity across Asia and Africa: A Delphi Study. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909621992785>

YUE-YI

Wow. Was that in Ethiopia, or across countries?

BELAY

No, in Ethiopia. And that was shocking for us, and we call that teacher professional identity crisis. It is a crisis because they would like to leave the profession, because it's not rewarding. In fact, the problem is bidirectional. The institutions select low-profile candidates and deploy them into the teaching profession—so it's not coming only from the teacher side, but institutions have also been contributing to this crisis.

So the norm I can identify is that teaching is a low-status profession. One of the interviews that we conducted in this study showed that when novice teachers are deployed to schools, there is a process called induction. They have to be mentored, they have to be shaped, and then they will gain experience from the existing teachers. But one of the interviewees said that the school principal was not happy on the arrival of this novice teacher, and he said to this novice teacher, "Why did you join the teaching profession? You should not have chosen this profession." So it is a school principal who is saying these kinds of things to a novice teacher, which is discouraging. We have diaries of this kind, which shows that the school principal is dissatisfied, and that the incoming novice teachers are also not welcomed properly, are not going through the proper induction process—which, again, contributes to the identity crisis.

This does not dismiss the few dedicated teachers and effective teachers that we have, but generally the majority have a problem. Back to you.

YUE-YI

Thank you, Belay. That story about the principal discouraging the novice teachers—which I think you shared at the RISE Conference one year—is such a striking example. In one of my first conversations with Lant, when I first joined RISE, he said, "You need to listen to this conference presentation where this member of our Ethiopia team tells this terrible and amazing story."

Let's move into the "what". So, branching out from the stories, what are some of the most influential norms that shape teacher practice in the context that you study? And Shintia, this is totally optional, but my suggestion would that maybe you could reflect on whether any of these norms fall into the personal, sociocultural, and institutional categories that Belay raised. I think in your work you've discussed norms across that whole range.

SHINTIA

Actually, in Indonesia, maybe it's more about the intersection between sociocultural and organisational norms. This is related to the fact that our teachers in our public schools are recruited through the civil servant recruitment system. The majority of the

A similar observation can be found in a separate case study on teacher career reforms in Ethiopia: "Interviews with respondents from the regional education bureaus reveal that perceptions of teaching have changed: once considered prestigious, teaching is now seen as a profession of 'last resort'" (p. 10). Yiman, W. (2019). Country note: Teacher career reforms in Ethiopia. IIEP-UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000370854/PDF/370854eng.pdf.multi>.

For related observations on career choices and respect for teaching, see remarks from interlocutor Kwame Akeampong in [Chapter 12](#).

Slides from Belay's presentation at the 2018 RISE Conference, "The Nexus between the Practice of Induction and the Formation of Novice Teachers' Professional Identity in Ethiopia", are available here: <https://www.riseprogramme.org/sites/www.riseprogramme.org/files/inline-files/IHagos.pdf>. A video recording of his conference presentation is available here: <https://youtu.be/yFKjGsHun0o?t=25642>.

people in Indonesia come from Javanese culture, and according to Javanese tradition we have this so-called obedience culture. So, what matters to teachers is to follow the regulations as a civil servant. What matters to teachers is to follow the instructions from the MoEC, or the local education agency. And being an excellent teacher is second to being a good civil servant.

What I mean by being a good civil servant is that an officer has to follow orders and has to respect their superiors—in this case, for teachers, the superior is the school principal or their school supervisors. It also means working according to the minimum hours per week, because it's stated really clearly in the evaluation criteria of civil servants that you have to work according to these minimum hours. So already their performance standard is very low; it's just attendance. And then they have to submit required reports and paperwork from time to time. Delivering quality teaching is not part of the demands that a civil-service teacher has to fulfil. Based on my observations, this really affects how teachers act.

How recruitment processes affect norms and quality in the teaching profession

YUE-YI

Belay, would you like to build on that?

BELAY

I think there are several factors that affect the teacher professional identity. Sociocultural and institutional factors are the major ones, although the personal is also a factor. In terms of the institutional factor, when they recruit and select teachers, I would say that the Ministry of Education was not serious in selecting at least those average-ability students.

We don't expect teachers to be exceptionally gifted or superior, but there should be a limit, because below a certain standard a person should not be eligible to be a teacher. Yet the Ministry of Education once declared that anyone can be a teacher. And that creates a problem: low-performing students who could not get other vacancies are joining the teaching profession. Which is a paradox because these students are going to be teachers who will be producing all the professionals in the country. But how can they produce when they themselves are not at the average level? So recruitment practice by the government needs to be reconsidered. That is one of the major factors, I would say. But there are several other factors that we can also further discuss.

For an argument by Shintia and a co-author that Javanese cultural traditions also affect pedagogy in mathematics classrooms, see Revina, S., & Leung, F. K. S. (2019). How the Same Flowers Grow in Different Soils? The Implementation of Realistic Mathematics Education in Utrecht and Jakarta Classrooms. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education*, 17(3), 565–589. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10763-018-9883-1>.

For another example of how cultural patterns can affect educational practice, see [Chapter 9](#) for interlocutor Ying-yi Hong's observations on how norms of quietness and of not standing out in terms of effort or achievement affect classroom participation in Hong Kong.

SHINTIA

Maybe this is more related to the “*why*”, but I would like to respond to what Belay just said. I have two points. First, it is true that the recruitment system in many developing countries, like Indonesia or Ethiopia, doesn’t really take into account teacher skills, or teacher knowledge, about teaching. As I also found in our teacher diary study, many teacher candidates actually choose teaching because they just didn’t get into the university that they wanted. So they were rejected by the military, they were rejected by the finance majors, and they just chose education as the last resort. That’s sad.

Actually, in Indonesia, teachers and other civil service officers historically have to vote for a government-affiliated political party. Teachers are recruited as civil servants, so they are part of the government. And despite their political preferences in the past, they have to vote for a party that they do not necessarily like or even know about. The culture in our public schools is not different from the culture in other government institutions. So as a result, many teachers in our public schools do not think as an intellectual who needs to be highly skilled in order to enhance student abilities. I can say that most of our teachers do not think in that way. On various occasions, Yue-Yi, I actually heard teachers mention that they are just the soldiers of the government who are ready to do whatever they’re instructed to do. “Just tell me what to do. I’m just a soldier, you know, so I will do whatever government wants me to do. A new curriculum, that’s okay, change the curriculum. We will do it as long as it comes from the government.” Something like that.

The second thing is that I would like to reflect on our education policy. Our policies are still around improving access to upper secondary schools, building school infrastructure, increasing teacher welfare, or reducing teacher absenteeism—as I mentioned earlier—so the quality of teaching has not been a great concern for our policymakers. For example, millions of our teachers are certified, but they scored very low in the 2015 teacher competence test. But these teachers are still employed, and they still continue to receive a certification allowance, which means that now they get even double of their base salary. The regulation concerning the teacher allowance says that as long as you fulfil the 24 hours of teaching slots per week, you will be entitled to the allowance. So you can imagine that regardless of how effective or ineffective the lessons are, teachers’ low performance is always tolerated. The teacher evaluation is just based on administrative measures, not performance. And in terms of education policy in Indonesia, I can say that we are not yet prioritising quality learning.

So that’s why the norms remain and never change. It’s always there because policy has not changed, and the situation is just so complex.

BELAY

Well, we have similar stories, actually. In Ethiopia we have a programme called GEQIP, which is an abbreviation for General Education Quality Improvement Programme. So quality appears to be a priority for the Ministry of Education. But there is also a paradox, which we’ll see, because quality practice is not there on the

For more on how the wider education and employment landscape affects the teaching profession, see interlocutor Katlego Sengadi’s remarks in [Chapter 6](#).

For another example of how civil service practices can narrow conceptions of the craft of teaching, see [Chapter 8](#) for interlocutor Soufia Siddiqi’s observations on teacher performance evaluations in Pakistan.

For more on Indonesia’s teacher competence test and the associated professional development programme, see Revina, S., Pramana, R. P., Fillaili, R., & Suryadarma, D. (2020). Systemic Constraints Facing Teacher Professional Development in a Middle-Income Country: Indonesia’s Experience Over Four Decades. RISE Working Paper Series. 20/054. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2020/054.

ground. GEQIP is a big, multi-million-dollar project, which is supporting the Ministry of Education from the pooled funds managed by the World Bank. It started more than 10 years ago, with a different phase every 5 years. Its name is Quality Improvement Programme, but, like Shintia said, teachers' competence and teachers' passion for teaching and learning still remains very low.

It's a paradox: people are discussing this Quality Improvement Programme, while on the ground there are lots of unskilled teachers. In fact, teachers were tested on their knowledge, and many of them had lower scores than expected. So, that is a paradox because if we are interested in quality improvement, then there should be an improvement in the knowledge and skill of teachers, and in their practice as well.

We also have another study, which was actually reviewed by RISE team members, and it is about teachers' engagement in schools. In that study, about 12 percent of the teachers were absent, and about 28 percent of those who were in school and who should have been in their assigned class for teaching were not in the classroom during the assigned period. So that makes up 40 percent. Then from among those who were actually in the classroom, 7 percent were not engaged in teaching. They spent the whole period without teaching in the class. So altogether that makes up about 47 percent of teachers who are not engaged in teaching. And we presented these figures to the Ministry of Education as well, as feedback. There are lots of controversies about these things. Those figures came from other studies that we reviewed, which were commissioned by the World Bank. And this is a serious concern: when half of the teachers are not engaged in teaching and learning, how can we expect learning to happen? This is a very big issue which needs to be taken up by the government and needs immediate action.

YUE-YI

Yes, it does seem to be a big problem in many countries.

Do we want to keep exploring this question of why norms emerge and why they remain? Shintia, I think what you're saying is that policymakers don't prioritise the right things, and they have a lot of power, and there's a culture of compliance to them. Belay, you're saying that even though the policy initiative is officially written down, somehow that doesn't translate to the ground. So, why do these gaps emerge?

Unattainable expectations—and cheating in exams

SHINTIA

Yue-Yi, actually, in relation to why the teachers didn't translate these ideals into real classroom teaching, I reflect from my own experience that teachers often take

For some perspectives from the RISE Ethiopia Country Research Team on the most recent phase of GEQIP, see Asgedom, A., Hagos Hailu, B., Lemma, G., Rose, P., Teferra, T., & Wole Meshesha, D. (2019). Whose Influence and Whose Priorities? Insights from Government and Donor Stakeholders on the Design of the Ethiopian General Education Quality Improvement for Equity (GEQIP-E) Programme. RISE Insight Series. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-RI_2019/012; and Tiruneh, D., Sabates, R., & Woldehanna, T. (2021). Disadvantaged Schools and Students in Ethiopia: Why is the GEQIP-E Reform Necessary? RISE Insight Series. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-RI_2021/026.

For more on norms around teachers' absence or presence in the classroom, see remarks from interlocutors Shwetlena Sabarwal in [Chapter 3](#) and Laura Savage in [Chapter 15](#).

shortcuts. They face pressure to teach effectively, and teaching effectively is often measured by students' scores, right? So instead of teaching effectively so that students learn effectively, they focus on the scores. I had a personal experience of this with my own teacher. And if I reflect on that experience, I now understand why my teachers chose to take a shortcut, by cheating to increase our scores instead of teaching us effectively.

Do you remember our cheating paper? We have a paper that talks about the cheating culture in national exams in Indonesia, Belay. And back in 2003, when for the very first time the national exam score was used as the only deciding factor in whether a student to passed or failed high school, I was in Year 11 of high school. I remember that in my high school alone, there were around 15 to 20 percent of students, who were my seniors at that time, who failed the exam and could not graduate. They could retake the exam a few months later, but it would be too late to get into university. This was really shameful for the students themselves, for the parents, and for the schools, knowing that so many students failed that year. And my school was one of the schools that had a good reputation. So everyone thinks, "Oh, what are we going to do about this next year?"

One year later, when I was in Year 12, it was my turn to take the exam. I heard that whatever answers we put in our answer sheet, our teacher will somehow change it to their answers. So teachers gathered in a large hall and deleted our answers—because we used pencils—and wrote their own answers, because our teachers just wanted to ensure that everyone passed the exams. And as a result, almost everyone got roughly the same score.

You can imagine that our schools were not ready for the standardisation of performance, or for effective teaching to be measured by student outcomes. So instead of teaching us so we can achieve the learning level that is required, our teachers took a shortcut to just save their face, and the school's face, by cheating. The cheating was not done individually by the students, but collectively by our teachers, and with support from our parents. I don't know if you had heard about things like this in Ethiopia, Belay, or if it's just here in Indonesia?

BELAY

It's a common problem here. We have an institution for managing national examinations, the National Educational Assessment and Examinations Agency. This agency has several times reported the practice of cheating in examinations, and the term they use is malpractice. This institutionally supported cheating practice on the examination is similar to your experience. It doesn't happen in every school, but it happens in some schools that were identified because all students got all the questions right, and that is practically impossible. So they had to suspect that there was malpractice, and they had to cancel the examination for all of the students—they announced it on the radio and TV.

Berkhout, E., Pradhan, M., Rahmawati, Suryadarma, D., & Swarnata, A. (2020). From Cheating to Learning: An Evaluation of Fraud Prevention on National Exams in Indonesia. RISE Working Paper Series. 20/046. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2020/046.

For related research in India, see Singh, A. (2020). Myths of Official Measurement: Auditing and Improving Administrative Data in Developing Countries. RISE Working Paper Series. 20/042. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2020/042; and Johnson, D., & Parrado, A. (2021). Assessing the assessments: Taking stock of learning outcomes data in India. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 84, 102409. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102409>.

For related research in the USA, see Jacob, B. A., & Levitt, S. D. (2003). Rotten Apples: An Investigation of the Prevalence and Predictors of Teacher Cheating. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 118(3), 843–877. <https://doi.org/10.1162/00335530360698441>; and Patrick, B., Plagens, G. K., Rollins, A., & Evans, E. (2018). The Ethical Implications of Altering Public Sector Accountability Models: The Case of the Atlanta Cheating Scandal. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 41(3), 544–571. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2018.1438295>.

There is individual cheating, but worse than individual cheating is the institutional setup where teachers and administrators are engaged in this kind of malpractice. It starts from the expectation of the school administrators and district education administrators: they expect the teachers to give students higher scores, so that they can pass to the next grade level. Otherwise, the teacher will be judged that he or she has not been teaching very well. So teachers will escape from this scapegoating by adding more marks to the performance of the students—which is also observed in the discrepancy between the score that teachers gave in one subject and the score that the same student got in a national examination, as well as the score that the same student got on national learning assessment for the same subject. For instance, if you have Grade 8 mathematics, the teacher will assign a score for the mathematics result for this student, and it will definitely be very high. When they sit for the national examination, the mathematics result will be lower than the schoolteacher’s score. And in the separate national learning assessment, the score on the mathematics test is even lower than the national examination results. This shows that teachers are adding higher scores so that they will be safe from the so-called accountability issue.

So there is unnecessary pressure. In fact, in my previous paper, I was talking about unity of purpose, and as part of unity of purpose the concept of ownership of the whole activity should be emphasised. If teachers own their duties, they will not be driven by external factors. Rather, they can change many things internally, because they own it, and they will be passionate about it. And then they can perform or deliver better. That is all in the paper that I presented at the last CIES Conference. Back to you.

YUE-YI

Thank you. I do remember that CIES paper. And with that paper, we’re getting into the “*how*” of this teacher norms project, which is about approaches for reorienting teacher norms for systemwide improvement in education.

But I did want to highlight that one thing that is implicit in the “*why*” of the stories that you both told is that education and teaching more specifically are very social endeavours. You both used the word “pressure”; Belay, you also mentioned teachers being “judged”. And how teachers are perceived, and how students are perceived, is very important in how they respond to the structures around them. So there’s formal accountability, but there’s also, “Well, what does the community think of this school? We need to protect its reputation.” And that all plays into these interactions and makes things very complicated, as you have both shown.

Hagos Hailu, B. (2021, April 26). Centrality of Unity of Purpose (UoP) in the Effectiveness of an Education System. Comparative and International Education Society, Virtual conference. Abstract available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y7pgvssh>.

Passion and proficiency in the craft of teaching

BELAY

Let me add a point here. I think the teaching profession and the education system is not like other systems. For instance, in a factory, the system can run very smoothly and it can also be controlled using external monitoring of whether the system is functioning well or not. But education is different. Teachers should be passionate about it, and there should be internal motivation, not external motivation. Those systems with good success in education, they have that kind of culture of internal accountability. So, when we discuss the “*how*”, we can also further elaborate on that.

YUE-YI

That’s so relevant, and a good connection. Shintia, do you want to come in with any initial thoughts on “*how*”?

SHINTIA

I still believe that we should start by defining what matters in teaching. Actually, Belay already discussed this a little bit. And because teacher performance is something that matters, other policies have to be aligned with these measures or indicators. These indicators are not necessarily student outcomes or high scores, like Belay mentioned, but instead the indicators of good teaching that can be used to guide various components in a teacher management system—including recruitment, teacher development programmes, teacher performance evaluations. It should not only be like, “As long as you can teach for 24 hours, although you are only sitting on your desk, this still counts as teaching.” So these indicators should be able to guide the performance evaluations and, if possible, the teacher allowance system as well.

I know it’s a long way to go there from where we are today. And I could say that reforms to change the current system are politically costly. But if we do not start from defining this very basic idea, I don’t think we can have a productive system, Yue-Yi. In Indonesia, we are still arguing about what really matters in a teacher. Many, many people say it’s okay if a teacher does not have good knowledge, because they can learn along the way. But, to me, how can you teach effectively if you don’t have adequate knowledge about teaching, right? Many people say that as long as someone has good behaviour and good character, they can be a teacher. But I don’t agree with that. When teachers are recruited into the system, ideally they should be highly skilled. The aim is not only to recruit enough teachers to staff the classrooms—but I think we have to shift the perspective to being more quality-oriented rather than only oriented to fulfil the quantity of teachers.

BELAY

I can supplement that. I think if teachers have the required knowledge and skills, they will have confidence in themselves when they engage in teaching. And if they have the confidence, then they will like it. If they like it, they can deliver. Otherwise, if they don't have the skills, they will not be accepted by the students, or even by colleagues.

And there is a need to find a way out from that perspective focusing just on the quantity of teachers. That "anyone can be a teacher" assumption should be challenged. It is totally wrong. There should be a minimum level of required skills and knowledge. And as I said earlier, teachers need not be superior or gifted or top scorers. But they need to have the minimum threshold for being a teacher.

YUE-YI

I completely agree with you on that. In my own experience, I'd always done well in school, but when I became a teacher I didn't have the skills of classroom management, honestly. And I think my students could tell that I didn't want to discipline them, and they took advantage of that. Which is perfectly understandable because they were rational human beings—as well as being teenagers who hadn't received much benefit from ten years of English class, so they just wanted to have fun. So, yes, I agree with both of you that there are minimum thresholds that we owe to children, because they deserve education.

Would either of you like to go into more detail about this question of "how"? Whether approaches for reorienting norms that you've seen in practice; or, Belay, with internal accountability and unity of purpose; or, Shintia, any shifts you've seen in policy or even in specific schools that can help improve norms?

SHINTIA

Going back to teacher recruitment, in Indonesia it follows the general civil servant recruitment system. For example, Yue-Yi, in one of our papers, I mentioned that the test for being a teacher is very generic. Whether you apply for a teacher position or to a non-teaching profession, even for a prison guard post, you have to take the same test. So the shortlisting process just doesn't make sense to me.

In good private schools in Indonesia, the recruitment was really rigorous, as I experienced myself. We start with microteaching, and then do demo teaching, and then an interview about your teaching statement or teaching philosophy. If you can pass that, then you might take a written test, psychological test, and content knowledge tests—and even after that, you will be evaluated during your first year. Someone will sit in in your class and see how effective your teaching is. And then they will decide after the first year whether you will be employed permanently or whether you need another year of probation.

In microteaching, a teacher trainee or candidate teaches a short lesson to a small group of people, to practice or to demonstrate specific teaching skills. See, for example, Stanford Digital Education. (2016, Oct 19). *Example Microteaching Session* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/FBxVfaXxnzw>.

But in public schools, we just don't have that. Once you pass the multiple-choice test, then you're practically accepted into the teaching profession for life. So I think maybe we should go back to the very basic idea of recruiting good teachers.

BELAY

Yes, I think I share your view on the point you just made. We have over 700,000 teachers in Ethiopia, and 10 percent of them are working in private schools, but 90 percent are paid by the government—and they are employed for life. There is no firing. And hiring is very easy, because it's not a competitive job. Anyone who applies can join; there is no rigorous testing procedure. So that complicates many things.

In fact, the “*why*” issue also comes back here. I would say it's about the political economy of learning as well. How does the government perceive learning? It is not a priority after all, for the government. So that is an issue in our context. What matters is expansion. People can easily see and count the number of teachers, they can count the number of schools built in every village. But the details of teaching and learning will not matter for the politicians. What matters for politicians is the number of schools, number of students, number of teachers, which is highly visible—and nobody's asking about learning. So that is the source of the problem. If politicians are committed, learning could be a priority. And if learning is a priority, then the government can push forward to make a change. But as I said earlier, what is visible is seen as more important than the invisible, which we call learning.

YUE-YI

Yes, this also reminds me of some of the things that Lant has written about with Dan Honig, about how for complex things like teaching, it's the account-based accountability—the narrative and really detailed understanding—that matters more than the accounting-based accountability—which is the standardised, easily visible, easy-to-count things.

So in our last few minutes, I wanted to ask whether either you have any last words you'd like to leave us with, whether this is a big takeaway, or just a thought that occurred to you during the conversation that you didn't have the chance to say?

Honig, D., & Pritchett, L. (2019). The Limits of Accounting-Based Accountability in Education (and Far Beyond): Why More Accounting Will Rarely Solve Accountability Problems. RISE Working Paper Series. 19/030. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2019/030.

Re-examining internal accountability and parental roles in education

BELAY

Maybe I would like to emphasise a few things about my paper on internal accountability systems. The good practice from Finland and other few countries is that teaching is a culture. They do it not because the boss is watching, but because

this is a culture which they value as a very important engagement. They built this over the years because they focused on internal accountability system. I believe this kind of approach should be promoted. The government and the community should be supportive, in order to build a culture of internal accountability. So if they own it, then they will not be concerned about whether somebody else is watching them while they are doing their work, but they do it because it's valuable.

I read a paper on Finland that said, "We don't need supervisors, we don't need inspectors coming from an external source to watch whether we are doing it right or not. We are our own supervisors." So they built this culture, and it has become part of the system as well. So I would like to emphasise that if we want to build a good system, we need to also encourage internal accountability, which will lead us to building a culture of teaching and learning.

YUE-YI

Actually, when I got to spend a month in Finland during my PhD, one thing that struck me was that part of their teaching and learning and internal accountability culture is that children are seen as taking ownership—to use the word you used just now—of their own learning. So that's very liberating for the teacher because teachers are responsible for doing their best, but there is no pressure on them about individual test scores because the children are seen as owners of that process.

Shintia, anything to add before we end?

SHINTIA

That makes me think of my experience in the Netherlands, during my masters and my PhD, when I had an internship at a school. And I think parents also play an important role here. In Indonesia, parents put a lot of pressure on teachers about students' scores—but not in the Netherlands, where, I think, even when their children fail, parents can accept it, and they will not blame teachers. Instead, they might talk about what is best to improve their children's learning, or something like that. In Indonesia, maybe that's not the case: parents will get very angry when they know their children get low scores from their teachers. So, I believe that parents also play a role. Not only the government, not only the schools. We can also informally involve parents to support teachers, so teachers can have more authority in their own teaching.

As Belay stressed in different parts of this conversation, teachers already have pressure from all directions. And, in countries like in Ethiopia and in Indonesia, parents' pressure also adds to it. The school community also has an important role in affecting teachers' perceptions of how to act and how to teach.

Hwa, Y.-Y. (2021). Contrasting Approaches, Comparable Efficacy? How macro-level trust influences teacher accountability in Finland and Singapore. In M. Ehren & J. Baxter (Eds.), *Trust, Accountability and Capacity in Education System Reform: Global Perspectives in Comparative Education* (pp. 222–251). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429344855-11>.

CHAPTER 8

On competing value systems, socioeconomic challenges, and what it means to be a good teacher

Yamini Aiyar & Soufia Anis Siddiqi

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YUE-YI

To kick us off, could you tell us about a story, experience, incident, or anecdote that illustrates how norms among teachers or among bureaucrats more generally can

deeply affect behaviour and practice? Especially when norms affect it in ways that aren't predicted by the formal rules or by economic models or whatever.

YAMINI

Should I go first?

YUE-YI

Please.

YAMINI

Okay. To me, this question really became visible in 2014 or 2015. We were doing a study in the state of Bihar in the north-eastern region of India. In fact, this study was a precursor of the work that we later did in Delhi, which was trying to understand how teachers responded to a Teaching the Right Level type of intervention. The Bihar intervention was in its sunset—it hadn't been completed and was closing down.

We had a focus group with some teachers, and we began by talking to them about the Teaching at the Right Level intervention. There was a lot of enthusiasm about the kind of pedagogical training that they had received, the different pedagogical tools that they used, and how children were responding to them. And so we asked them the question that had been on our minds, which was, "So why is it that children don't learn?" Because when they spoke to us about Teaching at the Right Level, they had a lot of things to say about how different types of pedagogical tools enable them to work with children in a particular way, and how they saw progress in children's learning. And we pushed them a little bit to say, "Given this experience, can you tell us what, in your mind, is a primary factor that constrains learning?"

What really struck me is how, when it came to the question of what it is that prevents students from learning, teachers have a lot of things to say about every single aspect of their life experience, and the school and the administration and the village and social context in which the school was running—everything except the classroom. This was consistent across all the teachers—and it was a mixed group of men and women at the cluster level. In Bihar, at the time, the educational administration was organised in such a way that every cluster was in charge of 15 schools. We were doing this conversation with a group of different teachers who had met at the cluster office. So it's not like this was a preordained discussion, or something that people had talked about before they came. It was a spur-of-the-moment reflection of what was going on in people's minds.

I found the contrast striking. On the one hand, when we were talking about a particular type of intervention, the classroom and what the teacher did in the classroom was at the centre. But when we talked to the teachers about challenges

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Aiyar, Y., Davis, V., Govindan, G. & Kapoor, T. (2021). *Rewriting the Grammar of the Education System: Delhi's Education Reform (A Tale of Creative Resistance and Creative Disruption)*. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE). https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-Misc_2021/01.

that they experienced as part and parcel of their everyday life, no one questioned or argued back, as you do in policy circles in Delhi, that “it’s not about learning outcomes.” Nobody challenged the fact that when children come to schools and classes, they don’t learn. Everybody agreed. But when it came to identifying the heart of the problem, there was a complete dissonance between what they were saying to me five minutes ago and what they were saying now. And that made me think maybe there is something about the context of the school, that prevents people who are very alive to the challenge, who have been part of an experience of responding to that challenge, from making those connections in their minds. So from there, we began to say to ourselves, “Okay, maybe we need to think about norms a lot more seriously.”

YUE-YI

Thanks for that. Wow. I could respond in so many different ways, but this is about hearing from you two. So Soufia, do you have a story you’d like to share?

Multiple identities in tension: teacher, bureaucrat, and gendered social identities

SOUFIA

Can I just make sure I got the question correctly? Were you asking about how norms are shaped by that larger bureaucratic environment, or how they may be constructed externally relative to what is traditionally known by the teachers, or am I reading too much into it?

YUE-YI

Either of those would be great. Really, the point of this question is just to elicit a story about norms you have seen and how that plays into your understanding. I’m sure you have many.

SOUFIA

I’m just trying to fish for one that would have some kind of conceptual anchor or relevance for you. There’s so many things coming to mind. But I do have one story in particular, though it’s a little bit chaotic. As part of this project on the political economy of the makings of a good teacher in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), which up until about 2012 was called the North-West Frontier Province, I went to this teacher training session. So every month, they have two days that are just called professional development days. And it is a cascade model, where there’s been like centralised training in Peshawar, and then those master trainers have gone to district teacher education centres, and then typically they’ve trained some secondary school teachers, and then those secondary

For one of Soufia’s research outputs from this project, see Siddiqi, S. (2022). Contested Identities; Competing Accountabilities: The Making of a ‘Good’ Public Schoolteacher in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Research on Improving Systems of Education. Paper number. <https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-2022/PE02>.

school teachers will go into their respective clusters of primary schools and provide training twice a month to primary school teachers.

This might seem very bizarre, but the norm at a lot of these training spaces is to be sat with families, in the sense that teachers are with their own children. I'm talking about female teachers in particular. And the reason I mention this is because, in the particular context of KP, the presence of teachers' own children in the school environment is quite significant. Families are usually on the larger side—Pakistan's average family size right now is roughly between five and six, which means you have between three and four children in a family, which is still the norm in KP. But there isn't a lot of systemic support to the teacher to perform their actual, active teaching in the school environment throughout the school day. And that extends even into the process of training.

So you'd go into these teacher training sessions, and you often see female teachers with their kids. As you can imagine, it's a bit like a mixture of a daycare and a very professional learning environment. And it's very noisy, and you can't actually tell the kids to stop being noisy—they're kids—but then there's also no space to leave them outside. So there's a trainer and she's yelling over the sound of children, and they're running around and doing other things.

If you were to describe this ethnographically, there's a woman who's sat at a particular table, probably where she's been allocated a seat; with her left arm reaching out to grab a child and kind of drag him back towards herself; and at the same time with her right hand, she's trying to take note of what's being communicated from the board. And then, who is this woman, right? She's a primary school teacher, but not just a teacher. She's already been identified by two identities, which is to be somebody's schoolteacher, but also be a bureaucrat who has to be responsive to state instruction—which is part of the reason that she is in this room today rather than having excused herself because, for example, "My husband can't take care of the kids so I have to stay home with them, and is there a different session that I can join?" And this is what some of these teachers were narrating to me themselves: they have to be present at that training, but then there's no place to leave the child. So she's now taken on a third identity, which is that she's also the mother, at the same time that she is the teacher who has to get that training and also the bureaucrat who could not say no to the date on which a particular event has scheduled. And this is part of compliance, right? Because if they don't show up, then their attendance won't be marked in the administrative portal.

Initially, I started the project with a question around two-way identity, which was that these teachers are both teachers and bureaucrats. But then, as I went deeper into the fieldwork, I realised that they're carrying at least three sources of identity at any given time. For the female teachers, it's about being somebody's mother, or daughter, or sister, and that hugely and significantly starts to define and shape the experience that they're having. Which is why for a lot of women, despite these challenges, this was a nicer place to be compared to the alternative of being stuck at home. Contrastingly,

For an example of how children's presence alongside their mothers in professional contexts can inadvertently affect norms (positively) in the long term, see [Chapter 10](#) for interlocutor Michael Woolcock's description of gender equality quotas in governance.

For more observations on the influence of civil service administrative structures on the teaching profession and on career choices, see remarks from interlocutor Shintia Revina in [Chapter 7](#).

For more on how gendered expectations affect women teachers' career choices in Pakistan, see Kirk, J. (2004). Impossible Fictions: The Lived Experiences of Women Teachers in Karachi. *Comparative Education Review*, 48(4), 374–395. <https://doi.org/10.1086/423360>.

for the men, by and large, the norm was that this is a makeshift arrangement, and that “this is where we are until we find a better job,” whether that’s in a higher level of the education sector—because a higher rank means a better pay scale and better pension at the point of retirement—or to exit the department entirely and go into a sector that has a more competitive wage structure, typically elsewhere within the government.

The only indication that I wanted to give from that example was the description of the chaos and multiple things happening at the same time. But what this speaks to is that there are so many tensions that these individuals are having to reconcile, and that’s all shaping the way that they’re seeing themselves. And I’m positioning it a little bit differently to how Yamini positioned her example, because my research question is a little bit different. It’s not so much anchored around what is driving learning outcomes. My question is very specifically structured around the making of a good teacher in the public education system. So the focus is on the sense of self based on these understandings of experiences, and on using them to narrate identity, whether to oneself, or to me as a researcher, or in communication back to the state. All of these different narrations, these accounts are what my research then spends a lot of time unpacking. These accounts reveal many layers of frictions and struggles in determining which identity features, ultimately, in the classroom. And at some point, it’s all of these identities, right.

Overall, it’s these accounts of many competing identities that allow my research to start saying: these are the ways in which the system then orients teachers away from learning, because there are so many competing voices, and instructions and explanations of the teacher’s day, which will ultimately remove time. So if we are saying that time is an important resource to facilitate the delivery of learning outcomes, this multiple split of who you are and what you’re supposed to be doing during the day is constantly determining how much time is ultimately dedicated to a coherent learning process. So those would be some of the norms I would think about.

YUE-YI

Thanks, Soufia. And it’s striking to me that even though you are both coming from, as you said, different points of inquiry, you both encountered some teachers having multiple and sometimes disjoint and competing lenses for how they go about their work and their life.

I’d like to move us to the “*what*” question, which is: in the contexts you’ve studied or worked in, what are some of the most influential norms that shape teacher practice or the practice of the bureaucrats that you’re familiar with? Soufia, I think you covered this question quite thoroughly. So, Yamini, do you want to come in on the “*what*”, to build on Soufia’s contributions?

For other observations on choices to join the teaching profession being driven by the desire for job stability or the opportunity to move on to other fields, see remarks from interlocutors David Evans in [Chapter 11](#) and Melanie Ehren in [Chapter 10](#), among others.

Conceptions of learning and socioeconomic gaps in the classroom

YAMINI

Before that, I just wanted to add one more dimension to what Soufia is saying. Soufia is right about our inquiry looking specifically at norms within the education system that then shape teachers' identities. But what we did find—and we didn't really build on this in our research, and listening to Soufia makes me think that perhaps this is the follow-up work that needs to be done—is how much social norms or social context actually shaped teachers and teachers' reactions.

There are two very different incidents that I wanted to bring out here. One was a focus group discussion with a group of largely female teachers in Delhi, where the point of inquiry was, "What motivated you to become a teacher? And what was your experience as you entered the profession? And how did you get socialised into the profession?" So naturally, the conversation veered in the direction of the pre-service training that they had, and so on. And then one of the teachers said, "You know, what we were never prepared for is the students themselves, and where they come from." Because you have to have a BA—at least for full-time teachers, there's a set of qualifications—this automatically means that they come from a different social bracket to where many of the kids in the government schools are coming from. And in the government schools in Delhi, you largely get children whose parents migrated into the city, and who largely are informal workers. This was also in a school that was on the outskirts of Delhi, in more of a slum area. So basically, very, very poor kids were coming into schools.

This teacher said, "I was not prepared for the psychological transition that I had to make, in the sense that the children came from such difficult contexts and such difficult experiences. And in some ways, I suddenly realised that we were their everything when they were inside school." So there was a lot of emotional and psychological support that they needed to give to these children. And she said, "This is not what we had expected. You know, we thought being a teacher puts you into a certain social bracket as a woman." It's the only profession where you don't necessarily have to always fight with your family to become part of this profession. It's seen as a status symbol, it's a woman-friendly role, and so on. And so you walk in expecting a very different kind of environment, and you're confronted with very, very difficult real-world challenges, where your own perspective on the world gets shaken up.

So in some senses, the expectation of what being a teacher is supposed to mean in society, and what being a teacher actually is like, are very different experiences. These differences shape identity formation once you're socialised into the system. And, you know, that is probably why a lot of teachers do talk about social distance with their students.

For another example of gaps between novice teachers' expectations and classroom realities, see [Chapter 6](#) for interlocutor Katlego Sengadi's account of being a novice teacher in Botswana.

In those conversations I was referring to earlier about teachers' perspectives on why children don't learn—where teachers would blame lots of things except the classroom—one of the things that would repeatedly come up is, “You know, you don't understand, you come from the city. These are children who come from really poor backgrounds. Their parents don't care, they don't even bother to brush the child's hair before they come to school. They don't make sure that their school bag is packed.”

And we can always turn around and say, “Look at this callous teacher who's not looking at focusing on their job.” But the reality is that for many teachers who are not sensitised to these challenges, maybe this is the only way you can react—I don't know; I'm not in that position, so who am I to say? But that blaming of non-classroom factors becomes part of explanation that you give to yourself for why there is this very challenging classroom environment and why you're not able to negotiate it. Because to negotiate it, then you have to do different things. And I certainly don't think that in India, at least, the need for this kind of sensitisation in our pre-service training has been openly acknowledged. So in the training we are focusing a lot on what it means to be a good teacher, and there's a lot of talk about social norms, and classrooms being spaces of equity, et cetera. We talk a lot about what is taught to children so that they are sensitised to concerns of caste, gender, religion, et cetera. But we never talk about what it means for an upper-caste, educated, usually middle-class individuals, to walk into a school with physically broken infrastructure and so on, but also to be dealing with children who come from a completely different background, which in some ways is a burden to your ability to achieve your purpose as a teacher.

As Soufia was talking, I was thinking about how this also plays into social norms of what is accepted as learning in the Indian context. I mean, I'm a parent of two small kids, and I do sometimes find myself saying, “If the teacher hasn't given you a double star in your class book,”—in the good old days when they were going to school physically; now it's all online—but, you know, “If you haven't got two stars in your book, then that's not good at all.” And maybe I expect my children to be first in their class, right? There's a social conditioning in which we all operate. And that social conditioning prioritises examination marks—that is how we judge the school, that is how the teacher is also judging the school.

This social conditioning was visible in Delhi, for instance, when a baseline was done just to assess students' learning levels because they were going to be organised into different sections within the same grade by virtue of their learning level. We were sitting in the headmaster's room, and a bunch of irate parents marched into the room. And they said to the teachers, “How can you give an exam to my children and base decisions on that exam, without giving advance notice to the children? They won't be prepared for the exam! So you can't put them into different sections. This is absolutely wrong!” The fact is that as a society, we really are expecting to see children perform well in exams, and that means they've got to prepare. And we don't think of an assessment as a status check. We think of an assessment as something that tells you how good or bad you are. And that's what creates a social consensus—in our paper we call it the classroom consensus—within which the teacher is anchored.

See also [Chapter 15](#) for an exchange between interlocutors Carlos Vargas Tamez and Laura Savage about different aspects of care in teaching.

So the teacher isn't divorced from all of this. These are the norms that shape how the teacher is approaching the classroom. And in those norms, the teacher in government schools is not approaching the classroom divorced from the school administration or from the government context in which the teacher is located. And in that government context where performance is determined by your ability to meet the checklist, then pass percentages, examinations, and syllabus completion become the only metrics that you will consider as relevant to performance. Therefore, you reduce the purpose of teaching just to those metrics. So that's the "what" of the norms, and I guess the "why" of the norms is why and how they eventually shaped this collective classroom consensus that the classrooms of today, across income brackets, are locked into.

For another example of dominant perceptions of learning that are centred on test scores, see the opening story from interlocutor Shwetlena Sabarwal in [Chapter 3](#).

One of the interesting things that is happening in India—and I'd be curious to hear from Soufia about whether this is replicated in Pakistan—is that the elites are now opting out of the existing public education system by moving toward international schools, now that they have become much more available and that elites are also much more global. So if I look around my peer group—I used to always say I was middle class and Lant [Pritchett] would laugh at me, so now that I'm old, I will admit that I'm not middle class, I'm an English-speaking elite—but therefore, if I look at my peers, most of them are very comfortable with the idea of putting their children into international schools to get that international learning. Now, that distance between elites and others is going to further strengthen the social consensus that exists around what the classroom should be. And the teacher is located in that consensus and discusses learning outcomes from that perspective.

YUE-YI

Yamini, by the way, Lant loves that story that you tell about parents marching into the principal's office, irately asking, "How can you test our kids without preparing them?" I've heard him tell it at least three times.

Anyway, your reflections—from both of you—are so dense that you cover multiple questions at once. So, Yamini, you got well into the "why", which is why these norms emerge and remain. Soufia, it would be great if you'd like to speak to the "why", whether in general or in response to the specific things Yamini raised about frictions from social stratification or social consensus about education is or even teachers' emotional and mental self-defence—all or any of that. Go for it.

SOUFIA

Yes, that was fascinating. And there was just happening at so many different levels. That's a good indication, right, of how complex these big education systems are. And I think that India and Pakistan are right up there, because together these two countries account for maybe a fifth of the world's population at this point.

One thing I was wondering, Yamini, was about some of these points that you've brought up in terms of stratification intentions, and then how to reconfigure being a

teacher—is this happening in a particular sector or school environment? Is it happening in a particular state or geography? Or is it happening at multiple levels? Because I want to be able to draw a contrast with the Pakistani setting, where education is devolved. Even though decision-making can be very similar at some levels, but because of Pakistan’s particular ethnic peculiarities and differentiation across provinces, there can be a lot of differences within or across provinces.

YAMINI

I think there’s too much diversity in India to say that it’s happening across the board. But there is also a degree of sameness, in the sense that I think the social consensus is broad enough for one to say that it is quite a widespread phenomenon. There are differences in state capacity and organisational behaviour across the different states of India, but, by and large, the hierarchical nature of the Indian bureaucracy is similar. In fact, I drew on Matthew Hull’s work in Pakistan to understand the obsession with paper in the Indian bureaucracy because, in some ways, the roots of the bureaucracy, the issues of trust, and the origins of that hierarchical architecture are fairly similar. And so I think some of the core norms are the same, but how they articulate the norms varies.

One of the things that I don’t think we understand well enough—but I’m going to hazard a guess here as opposed to sharing a well-researched point—is that particularly in southern India, where both socioeconomic indicators and literacy levels are higher, and administrative systems operate at a slightly more efficient though not necessarily effective rate, there is also this big move towards privatisation of schooling. So, possibly, it is the poorest of the poor whose children were going to the government schools pre-COVID. I don’t know what impact COVID is going to have on all of this. But that further creates a social distance between the students coming into schools and the teachers. And that may potentially exacerbate some of these societal fissures in how teachers respond to students in the school. But this is a hypothesis. It’s not something that I can say with any great certainty.

Hull, M. S. (2012). *Government of paper: The materiality of bureaucracy in urban Pakistan*. University of California Press.

What it means to be a good teacher, according to socioreligious ideals and civil service evaluations

SOUFIA

Okay. For my particular study, the space of research is quite focused: it’s public education. Although there is some referencing to what’s going on in the private sector, it’s not something that I’ve focused on. Most of my data is coming out of KP’s state structures and decisions.

One observation from that data relates to levels of schooling. I've spent a lot more time at the primary level. I have also had engagement with teachers who are operating at the middle school level, which is post-Grade 5. There's a very interesting politics to that level of recruitment and hiring and working. So: better skills, better pay, this different sense of prestige in association with being at the middle school level rather than primary level. And there's also an understanding of university teaching to be even more advanced than school teaching, as opposed to developing depth within each of these levels of education.

So there is an interesting association, I think, with the teacher's ability is being quantified in the same way as you would quantify student ability. Student ability is typically marked by gradation and progression through different levels, which is very different to how we understand what good teaching looks like. Good teaching entails that you're very good at content and pedagogies required for a certain level of teaching at which you're employed. And so it shouldn't mean that primary school teachers are less important or less competent than university professors, because they're very different realms of learning. But that depth of cognition isn't a driver, I would say, of teacher norms in the KP context. On the other hand, it's really interesting because the sense of being—and of who you're supposed to be—is to some degree frustrated by differentiation in resource levels and some of the factors I mentioned earlier.

That said, interestingly, there's still a huge cultural value or sentiment that is very much associated with teaching. So for a lot of the teachers in my fieldwork in a lot of state schools, this cultural valuing of teaching is a norm that they expect society to protect and raise up—and this is not a feature on the basis of which they discriminate between public or private systems. It is something that even state teachers or state-employed teachers will expect across the board. And it ties in with the prestige or social status associated with teaching.

Pakistan is predominantly Muslim, and KP within Pakistan is predominantly Muslim. It's predominantly a Sunni version of Islam, although there are pockets in the very north of the province, upper Chitral, where we move towards, for example, Ismaili communities, which are an offshoot of the Shiite sect of Islam. And so there is relative homogeneity in terms of religious subscription. Also, KP is predominantly Pakhtun. So there are certain cultural sentiments and drivers of teacher norms, which are very homogenous at the end of the day. And one of them is the association of teaching with the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and this idea that he was a teacher, he was a reformer, he was a thinker, and he was a progressive. So there is a question of why is teaching in today's state-administered system not given similar social prestige, as is traditionally prescribed by Islamic principles, or by cultural sentiment, or by the embodiment of teaching, or teacher as role by the prophet of Islam himself? There has been repeated reference to that kind or that line of thinking. In a way, the source of frustration for the teachers is not the position itself or the profession itself, or even the asks of the profession. The source of frustration is that: given that teaching is so important, how is it that society is not recognising all the things that we do?

For a similar observation, see remarks from interlocutor Verónica Cabezas in [Chapter 2](#).

For a related observation about the tension between altruistic religious motivations and transactional employment structures in the teaching profession, see remarks from interlocutor Masooda Bano in [Chapter 9](#).

The specific source of tension, especially within how the state narrates teaching to teachers, or how it constructs career pathways for teachers, is about how teacher performance is quantified for the purposes of the state. This is something that I'm unpacking in one of the chapters I'm currently writing. And so far what I've talked about is very much a sociocultural angle to that narration of teachers and their merit. But when we look at a systemic kind of construction of merit and of performance, it's primarily based on years of experience. This is literally how the civil service rules narrate performance evaluations and outcomes. I actually have a copy of it here, and if you look at the performance evaluation report—this is it, this sheet of paper—this report is the basis on which teachers will then file for promotion. They're asking for standard demographic information like name, qualifications, scale of pay and present pay. Then the particulars that count for evaluation metrics are, for example, number one: "Judgement and sense of proportion". There's no rubric to explain what in the world that means. Number two, "Integrity, cooperation with staff, relation with public". And for the responses, if you look very closely, there's just a short line.

YUE-YI

Right.

SOUFIA

You're supposed to capture all these really complex and difficult ways of being into a line. And when I spoke with seniors and people at the district level who have to write these kinds of evaluation reports, I asked them to explain to me, "How would you fill this out?" They said, "We wouldn't. We would just write, 'Good,' 'Good,' 'Good,' 'Good,' 'Good.' Who has time to unpack what any of this means or whether they're doing it in the classroom?"

But when you speak to the teachers—and it's an ethnographic piece of work, right? So I spent a lot of time watching teachers do their work. And at some level it is sometimes difficult to remove yourself as, for example, a citizen or as a young person or somebody within education or a woman, because sometimes that entire experience of how much work the teacher does is very emotional. They pay out-of-pocket to make sure that kids will get their stationery because their parents can't afford it. Or in Pakistan, for instance—and this is across the country—teachers run enrolment drives to make sure that kids come to school, and they will go and literally fetch the students in their class from their homes. And I've seen situations where they will call the parents into school after school hours, outside of any school council meeting, so that the parents can be sat down and really be encouraged and assured. And these mothers are saying, "Well, my husband isn't here, he works somewhere else." This is also a part of KP's particular context: the economy is so fragmented that families are often split apart when the father working elsewhere, and the mother doesn't have enough education to respond effectively to the school's requirements. So the bulk of the responsibility is falling upon the teachers.

For more on how standardised performance evaluations interact with complex and multifaceted expectations of teachers, see [Chapter 14](#) for interlocutor Mike Hobbiss' opening example drawing on his experiences as a teacher in the UK.

For another example of teachers going beyond the call of duty under challenging circumstances, see [Chapter 10](#) for interlocutor Michael Woolcock's description of a mission-driven school in Palestine.

What I found was an interesting contrast with what Yamini was describing was that the teachers seemed more receptive, and they actually seemed to be internalising this responsibility to go and do that extra work of the parent. And the way some of the teachers explained it was to link it back to that religious and cultural sentiment. They would say things like, “In Islam, the teacher is given the same importance as the parent. And so this is why we do the kinds of things that we do. We’ve taken this responsibility to make sure that the kid knows something at the end of the day.” So some sociocultural homogeneity is contributing to what actually does keep the system being pulled together.

But, at the same time, there seems to be a lack of vocabulary on the state’s end to really capture what teachers inevitably spend so much of their time doing. Even if the teachers are okay with doing it, their frustration is ultimately directed towards the system’s evaluation of them, and not necessarily toward the community’s relative lack of participation in children’s education.

Empathetic care for children and incremental change over time amid difficult circumstances and rigid administrative systems

YUE-YI

Yamini, I’m curious, what’s your response to that? And as you respond, I’d like to prompt you to bring in a bit of the “*how*”, in terms of how we can deal with all these different sets of values and shortcomings in vocabulary and tensions, to reorient norms toward purpose—because I know your Delhi book talks about building toward such a change gradually.

YAMINI

Thanks. That was absolutely fascinating to listen to, Soufia. I learned a lot. And it made me think a little bit more about some of the things I’ve seen in the field. One interesting thing, to me, is that all the teachers we have interacted with across different settings—and I should add the caveat that my interactions have largely been with government-school teachers—everyone, all the teachers are deeply motivated individuals. They actually do fundamentally believe in the purpose of teaching. And that means that there are several teachers that go out of their way—as you described, Soufia—in very, very difficult circumstances ensure that they give their all to students.

I remember one teacher whom we spoke to in a Delhi school. And, you know, corporal punishment has been banned in India under the Right to Education Act, although there are all these stories of old-school teachers with the stick and the

Aiyar, Y., Davis, V., Govindan, G. & Kapoor, T. (2021). *Rewriting the Grammar of the Education System: Delhi’s Education Reform (A Tale of Creative Resistance and Creative Disruption)*. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE). https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-Misc_2021/01. To hear Yamini discuss this study in a podcast hosted by Marla Spivack, see <https://riseprogramme.org/podcast/yamini-aiyar>.

willingness to give you what we call a *jhap*, just a quick slap on the cheek to get you to do your work. And we did see examples of corporal punishment when we were doing school observations. We were speaking to a particular teacher who had been quite harsh with his students in class. And in the course of that conversation, he said, “One day I walked into the class, and there was this student who was falling asleep, and it really made me angry. I was shouting at the child, but later I took the child out to ask her what had happened.” And when the teacher finally got the chance to speak to the child, he realised that the student had come from a particular slum, where overnight the government had come in with bulldozers to raze the slum. This happens quite frequently. So the poor child had to spend the night sleeping on the cart that her father, who’s a hawker, uses for work—that’s why she was so tired when she came to school. And the teacher said, “It just brought tears to my eyes, and I felt so bad about what I was doing.”

So teachers really do feel for the children. And even though they often express themselves, out of mere frustration, in ways that we would judge as negative, they do question the negativity and they are reflexive about it. But they also are embedded in the government system, which privileges a certain form of behaviour that undermines the emotional connection that classroom teachers have with the students. This is at the heart of the question of defining purpose and of building a performance narrative that is linked to that purpose. The administrative system operates so much in terms of hierarchy, and in ways that rationalise hierarchical behaviour as a form of extracting performance and therefore extracting accountability, because, as Lant says, it tends to conflate accounting with accountability. The norm is accounting—and, in the classroom, accounting then becomes about pass percentages and syllabus completion.

And when you try to change that norm, it’s not an automatic shift. It’s not like teachers don’t want to improve the quality of the teaching and see more kids do well. It is that they are stymied by not being able to identify what’s the best approach. So in Delhi, for instance, they were freed up during the first few months of the experiment, to say, “You can teach in the class the way you want. Syllabus completion is not the goal. Bringing children’s learning levels to a place where they are closer to grade-level expectations is the goal.” And we found that the question on everybody’s mind is, “What does that mean? What does it mean to teach differentially? What does it mean to teach outside the syllabus?” And over time, as the reform got more routinised and normalised, and as teachers began to think about this differently, they would often talk about their students using the same language of examinations and passing, et cetera. You know, “This child is a good child, they will pass the exam. This child is a mediocre child, they will have difficulty passing the exam.” But they would add into it a lot about, “What were the learning challenges that those students had? And what are the different ways in which they could teach that child to get them closer to exam readiness?”

So when we think about how to change norms, we need to recognise that change is not a matter of simply changing the metric. It’s actually about long, deep engagement

See Honig, D., & Pritchett, L. (2019). The Limits of Accounting-Based Accountability in Education (and Far Beyond): Why More Accounting Will Rarely Solve Accountability Problems. RISE Working Paper Series. 19/030. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2019/030. For an interview with Dan Honig and fellow interlocutor Sharath Jeevan, see Chapter 4.

with the changed metric in a way that allows the teacher to work through that journey of transition. And that will not give you the kind of outcomes you want in a year, in two years, in three years. And that's always a challenge, right? Reformers need to see some kind of output to justify and legitimise their reform. But the truth is that reform is not about those outputs. Reform is actually about changing how people see themselves—and that change is a slow and complex process. It involves building trust. It involves seeing by doing. And it also involves the reformer being comfortable with saying, “I'm not going to get the dramatic changes I want. I'm only going to get very minor, incremental changes, but it's in those incremental changes that the big shift will take place.”

When the staffroom conversations moved away from only complaining, toward some complaining but also talking about whether children in their classes were ready to pass the exams or not, and then shifted even further forward to where they were still talking about children's ability to pass the exam or not but adding a little bit more into that to discuss what the learning challenge was; I think that's pretty good progress.

YUE-YI

I'd agree. And it's a reason for hope. And we're already over time, but, Soufia, I just wanted to give you a minute for any last words.

Teacher accountability structures, blame games, and teachers' sense of self

SOUFIA

I just wanted to add real quick that I've worked in the Punjab as well; and one thing that I did want to observe in this conversation was that during the first few months that I was in KP, initially I felt like there was a really large difference between the teacher ethic and approach in KP, and the one that I had seen for a year and a half working in the Punjab. And for the longest time, I couldn't really understand it.

The distinction is that the teachers in Punjab are more likely to complain, more likely to be disgruntled and frustrated. If you go and speak to them, they'll immediately start complaining about everything—not just the system, but the school, the classroom, the parents, themselves. Everything. And this is a hypothesis, and it's worth testing at some point, but I think this ethic might have come out in the aftermath of the Punjab Education Roadmap, which was very, very high-stakes accountability that teachers really struggled with. And they suffered extensively throughout that almost decade of lots and lots of accountability. Often, they were being held accountable through metrics that were not designed for teachers, like on infrastructural metrics, and on some level of student performance when assessments had not even been reformed enough to really demonstrate any kind of learning or teacher performance. But the

stakes were high in the sense that you could be penalised so you would lose money from your salary; or you would be transferred out of your village or district immediately without any further investigation. What that might have done to the system, over the course of time, is to allow teachers to internalise a really negative sense of self. And all of that was communicated through multiple things, not just the system, but it's very hard to pinpoint where the punishments and where the negativity is coming from, and how it's being directed. We can make sense of it because we're researching the system so we can see who did what. But I think in the everyday of that chaos, it became very difficult for teachers to make sense of what it meant to be teaching.

KP has had a very different experience. They did not follow that level of high-stakes accountability, even though they did develop a set of metrics. And they currently still do not hold teachers to account on the basis of infrastructural metrics, or even student performance. And so it's a double-edged sword. It's a bad thing because it's very hard to determine where the system is in terms of learning performance. But, in a sense, it's been a good thing because it's still left—in my opinion, based on my fieldwork—room for teachers to respond well to any attempts from the system to change the quality of teacher training, or anything related to it or stemming from it. I just thought I should stick in that final comparative thought.

For one account of the different reform experiences in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, see Naviwala, N. (2016). Pakistan's Education Crisis: The Real Story. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED570671>.

CHAPTER 9

On culture, politics, religion, and top-down influences on educational priorities

Masooda Bano & Ying-yi Hong

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This conversation took place on 29 November 2021.

YUE-YI

Let's start with a scene-setting question: can you share a story, experience, incident, or example that illustrates how norms, whether among teachers or other humans, can

affect behaviour or interactions in ways that wouldn't necessarily be predicted by the formal rules or by the economic model or by other prior expectations?

MASOODA

It depends on what you're interested in. I work a lot on norms and all, but more in religious settings. So I know a lot about the processes of why norms adapt or change over time, but normally the examples come from that context.

If I think of RISE studies in the mainstream education sector, an interesting example that comes to my mind is from the Pakistan study in which I'm looking at why even in the low-performing state schools some children still manage to excel. I mean, all the state schools in Pakistan are low-performing in terms of quality of education, but these are particularly weak state schools. But these children go beyond expectations and are able to complete secondary school—which the majority in Pakistan's state schools fail to do—and then are able to go to university. And when I look at the successful children and map the factors—of course, there are very different factors, the motivation they get from the home and from the mother, all of that—but the interesting bit is that a lot of them also mentioned a dynamic teacher, especially in the final years of schooling, who had a phenomenal role in getting them interested in their studies and helping them pass with high grades and enter a good university.

I'm now coming to your main question, because these students give examples of these teachers who are very committed to them, and who give them this motivation to excel. The teachers were going well beyond the standard, to the extent that some of the teachers knew these students came from difficult family backgrounds, and they used to say, "If there is a financial problem, let us know, we'll find a way to address it. Because we see the potential in you and we want you to do well." And you can see that these teachers have a very different motivation—even though they're in a system like Pakistan's, where all the development literature right now is talking about improving financial incentives. But in this case, you'll find that in these teachers there is always a religious motivation. When their students elaborate on their profile, they always say that "this person was very religiously motivated," in the sense that they believed in helping students and others because Islam places a lot of emphasis on being a good teacher. The students used the word "wali" to describe them, which is very interesting. Wali is a word for somebody who is so spiritually exalted that they don't care about material ambitions.

So there are cases of teachers who, even in failing state schooling systems, are somehow very internally motivated. It's a combination of a bit of religious motivation and a bit of just taking pride in real excelling. And the financial motivation never came up, because the students always said that, "The teacher would give me my tuition fee if I couldn't pay for it." I'm sure that improved financial incentives would not crowd out these other motivations, if the state was to improve financial incentives. But all I'm saying is that you do find these unusual teachers. And if I had the opportunity to do a

See, for example, Bano, M. (2012). *The rational believer: Choices and decisions in the madrasas of Pakistan*. Cornell University Press. <https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9780801450440/the-rational-believer/>.

Bano, M. (2022). Narratives of Success against the Odds: Why Some Children in State Schools Go Far in Life—Evidence from Pakistan. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/104. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/104.

follow-up study, it would be to look at these teachers more closely to see how exactly they stay so committed to the students in a system where other people don't.

YUE-YI

That's really interesting, because it's like there are the dominant norms among typical low-performing teachers, then there's a subset of teachers with their own norms that are in some ways countercultural but at the same time very aligned with other aspects of culture.

MASOODA

Exactly. It's a counterculture against the school culture. In fact, in the paper that I think you've read on the anti-work culture, we find that in state schools these motivated teachers are normally being discouraged by their colleagues. But the profiles of motivated teachers that I'm telling you about are senior teachers, so by then they can influence the school, and they're not the type who will be crowded out by the non-working culture.

YUE-YI

That makes sense. Ying-yi, do you have an example to share with us?

YING-YI

Actually, I will start from the students' side. In Hong Kong and in many Asian classrooms—you know, classrooms in the mainland or in Japan—oftentimes students are quite quiet. And you will see that even when the teachers want them to answer some questions or want them to ask questions, most of them will not really come out and voice their opinions or responses. I have observed this behaviour—and it was true at least before, maybe it has improved now—and one reason for this quietness is because there is quite a strong norm among students that they just don't want other people to think that they are trying to brag about themselves or show off. So putting in more effort or showing others that you are a high performer is not a socially desirable behaviour among students. Oftentimes these norms, although they are not rules or regulations, would still affect students' responses.

So with that behaviour as a common thing or normative thing to do in the classroom, the teacher's response, oftentimes, is that they don't expect students to have a very active type of participation in the classroom. And, on the contrary, if there are one or two students who are constantly asking questions or constantly being very proactive in the classroom, sometimes certain teachers would have a difficult time handling such students because these students are non-normative. They are not following the usual quiet norm of the students. I think that might be one thing that would affect teachers' practices as well.

For a related observation, see [Chapter 12](#) for interlocutor Kwame Akyeampong's remarks on the need to take seriously the teacher's position as a community role model.

For a different example of a subset of teachers whose norms differed from most of their colleagues, see [Chapter 14](#) for interlocutor Alice Cornish's remarks on the Global Teacher Prize Ambassador community.

Bano, M. (2022). Beating the 'Anti-Work' Culture: Lessons from a Successful Attempt to Improve Performance in State Schools in Pakistan. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/105. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/105.

YUE-YI

I struggled with a variant of that, personally, when I went to undergrad in the US, because class participation was part of your grade—which was rather terrifying for me at first.

YING-YI

That's right.

Religious ideals, cultural respect, and political vulnerabilities

YUE-YI

Well, thank you for both of those examples. And I really like how they both get into not only educational norms, but also wider norms in society that affect education, even if we might not think so on the surface.

Continuing in this area of the sorts of norms that affect teachers and education, we're moving on to the “*what*”: in the contexts that you've worked in and studied, what are some of the most influential norms that shape teacher practice, or practice in other aspects of education, or just human interactions generally? I know that's a very broad question, but the goal of this project is to explore as broadly as possible at the initial stage.

MASOODA

Ying-yi, do you want to go first?

YING-YI

You go ahead.

MASOODA

Okay. So in my case, maybe two or three broad motivations for teachers come out. One is in countries like Pakistan and Nigeria, where I've done quite a bit of work, they are Muslim-heavy societies, and teaching is a very religiously important profession. But in the modern context, a normal state-school teacher never thinks of teaching in that way. Because of the colonial past and all of that, there's a division between teaching in the religious sector, where you would think of that religious tradition in which being a teacher is very important, and teaching in the state sector, where it becomes very transactional because the state gives you money and asks you to do something, and this religious norm dimension disappears. But a few teachers, like

For some of Masooda's work on Nigeria, see Bano, M. (2017). *Female Islamic education movements: The re-democratization of Islamic knowledge*. Cambridge University Press; and Bano, M. (2018). Skills Development and International Development Agenda Setting: Lessons from an Intervention in Northern Nigeria. *The European Journal of Development Research*, 30(5), 789–808. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-017-0125-0>.

those in the example I gave you, still do draw on that religious norm, and those are the ones who do quite a lot for the children.

In Islamic culture, traditionally the Prophet himself is seen as a teacher—he’s the idealised teacher. So that conception of the teacher is present in broader society, even if state-school teachers don’t draw that inspiration actively when teaching but think of it instead as a transaction, as a job they’re paid to do. But you can mobilise that motivation quite easily because the norm is quite dominant in the society. Do you get my point? I think these kinds of motivations are under-explored in the international development sector, as well as by the state. Because in this postcolonial context, the state wants to use language that is all about secular, modern discourse. So the religious discourse is actively crowded out, when in fact it is a very important motivation that can still be mobilised, in my view, in state schools. Because we have strong religious norms, which encourage good teachers because there are otherworldly rewards promised for being a good teacher and role model and all of that, apart from the rewards you might get here.

Secondly, remember that in South Asia and even Nigeria and similar contexts, especially in rural settings, these are all traditional contexts where in the village there might be a few people who become prominent because they are educated. So there’s a cultural norm there too, where the teacher or headteacher of a school will have a certain respect and recognition because they’re playing a role in society. They can write letters for other people; they can read signs and newspapers for people.

To be honest, these two motivations—the religious one and the cultural status and respect in the community which comes from being a good schoolteacher—are the only ones I can think of in addition to the standard motivation, which is that financial incentives have to be decent enough for somebody to take the job seriously. Though, having said that, in a lot of Islamiyya schools in the Nigerian context, which aren’t just Islamic schools but do modern education as well, you can mobilise a lot of volunteer teachers through religious norms. And they work very seriously and do very good work. I’m not trying to undermine financial incentives, but all I’m saying is that the balance of the two can enhance your ability to mobilise many more teachers in these countries. But the state and donors just don’t have any idea how to do it.

YUE-YI

Masooda, that’s actually one thing that Lant and I write about on the teacher careers paper, which is coming out soon: that a lot of policymakers, maybe because they’re influenced by some economists, only think about the finances, when motivation is so much more complex.

Ying-yi, the floor is yours: any thoughts on the range of norms that affect teachers and education and interactions?

For a related observation about the tension between multifaceted religious ideals and one-dimensional bureaucratic standards in the teaching profession, see remarks from interlocutor Soufia Siddiqi in [Chapter 8](#).

See Bano, M. (2022). International Push for SBMCs and the Problem of Isomorphic Mimicry: Evidence from Nigeria. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/102. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/102

Hwa, Y. & Pritchett, L. (2021). *Teacher Careers in Education Systems That Are Coherent for Learning: Choose and Curate Toward Commitment to Capable and Committed Teachers (5Cs)*. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE). https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-Misc_2021/02.

YING-YI

Well, you know, there are a lot of norms. Here in Hong Kong, the political situation plays a big part—I don't know whether you've heard about the national security law, which was implemented in July 2020. Under this law, there are a lot of things that you cannot talk about openly. And, of course, in school, this means that there are things you cannot teach. So for us the new dimension is this political dimension.

For teachers, I think they are oftentimes in a vulnerable situation, especially for teachers who are teaching social studies or even Chinese history, because there are different interpretations of contemporary Chinese history. And there were cases where the way in which the teacher talks about certain periods of time in contemporary China were seen as not so lawful or not so aligned with governmental discourse.

So I think that, actually, we are at a point of norms transition—I think that might be the right term. Because before the 2019 social movement in Hong Kong, I think teachers had a high degree of freedom of expression in the classroom. And many teachers would not have problems selecting their teaching materials or what they want to use in their classroom teaching. But after that point, now that we are in a transition, many things have become politicised. There are red lines that some teachers might sometimes step on, or they might be seen as violating certain regulations. Actually, oftentimes, it might not matter as much whether their expectations or worries—that what they say might be seen as infringing on the national security law—are valid or not, because they might self-censor. So that might describe the situation in Hong Kong now, a transition for some norms of self-expression.

For more on the politics of open expression in the classroom, see interlocutor Joan DeJaeghere's observations on teacher practice in Vietnam in [Chapter 3](#).

YUE-YI

Thank you. Malaysian teachers have experienced a bit of this for a long time. Like there was one teacher who organised a protest against the government, and they transferred that teacher to some rural school—and that sort of example is often enough to scare other people in self-censoring, as you say.

YING-YI

Also, in Hong Kong there has been a lot of turnover. I think there are unprecedented numbers of teachers leaving their jobs. Of course, one reason is that some of them might be migrating elsewhere, while others decided to retire early, because they don't want to be bothered by this.

Tradition and post-materialism, East and West

YUE-YI

Sounds like a very volatile and uncertain time. I want to give you both the chance to respond to each other. But as you do that, I also wanted to flag that we're well into the "why" question, which is about the factors and relationships underlying why certain norms emerge and remain. Ying-yi, you talked about political factors; Masooda, you talked about both religious and social status factors. So if you want to speak more about the "why", or respond to what each other have said, please feel free.

MASOODA

I'm not sure how to respond to each other unless we have a question—like if you thought there's a common thread between us that you want us to discuss. Otherwise, it's difficult to know how to respond to each other, given the different contexts and all.

YUE-YI

That's fine. Then why don't you just focus on speaking about the "why"—so speak more about why certain norms emerge, why some norms are more dominant and some are less dominant.

MASOODA

On that question, in contrast to the Hong Kong context and the political nature of the norms transition, it could be that the religious and cultural motivations are the dominant ones in the context I was talking about because it is still a traditional society. So there is a different level of societal development—even when we talk about developing countries, they're at different stages of development. Which also relates to the earlier point that is coming out across my RISE papers about how, in developing countries, the state and international development institutions lean towards a modern secular discourse about policy, where they think about financial incentives as the main variable to engage with, the planning is done accordingly.

But I think another related issue is that this planning is also done on basis of urban development. Basically, they're keeping in mind Abuja in Nigeria, Islamabad and Lahore in Pakistan, or Jakarta in Indonesia, but they don't actively recognise that the reality of rural living is quite different than urban living. And education policies and curriculums are national—and they're also increasingly international, because they're trying to go for, "This is the 'best practice' curriculum internationally, so we will adopt it," but it might not even suit your urban culture, much less the rural culture. So you end up creating this aspiration—and across the developing world, the subconscious ambition that all curriculums are geared towards is formal-sector employment. So,

again, it's a very financially led, modern-living kind of culture. But the problem is that a lot of these societies are still in quite a traditional mode. So even in Kano, northern Nigeria, my respondent might want a very modern, comfortable lifestyle, with good roads, good schools, good buildings—because they've seen them in the urban context in Abuja and elsewhere—but they don't necessarily want gender norms shifting the way the state school is now promoting Western-centric equality. They still want a woman to be educated, but primarily in the role of the mother and not necessarily going out to work. That's partly because there are not enough jobs anyway, but even if there were jobs, some of them traditionally just might not want it.

So in some way the challenge is that this norms evolution is happening in contexts that are still more aligned to the traditional cultures where the teacher gets a prominence in the village social network if he or she plays some societal role for them, and where religious norms are very strong. And if you look at the Western context, historically, similar kinds of motivations were behind the education sector—it's just that in the West then socialisation and economic growth and all of that allowed the state to move toward modern, quality school education, and other motivations were further sidelined. In some developing countries, right now you're in the situation of not being able to provide the quality education that the West can, but at the same time the state school comes and disrupts all the cultural traditional norms. So especially in the rural context, societies are getting neither good-quality education, nor the traditional preservation of culture that they historically want from education.

Anyway, all I'm trying to say is that the kinds of norms I've highlighted for you are strong markers of traditional societies—and, historically, all societies wanted similar norms. It's just that the states in developing countries are now trying to disengage from these religious and the cultural norms, while in Western society as a whole has moved on a bit.

YUE-YI

Thanks so much, Masooda. Ying-yi, I just wanted to say that as you respond to this, or to the “*why*” question more generally, feel free to draw on your wider work beyond education. I think your East-West work is so interesting, especially in relation Masooda just said. So bring in whatever you want.

YING-YI

So in my work, I show that Hong Kong is the place where East meets West. At the very beginning of this conversation, I told you about how Chinese students are very quiet in the classroom, I think that would be a more traditional way of behaving. However, I think Hong Kong has moved from relying on Chinese tradition to a more modern society. Many young people in Hong Kong hold post-materialistic views, according to many of the surveys that have been conducted over the years. So this type of mix affects the classroom, because oftentimes the classroom is a reflection of

See Bano, M. (2022). Curricula that Respond to Local Needs: Analysing Community Support for Islamic and Quranic Schools in Northern Nigeria. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/103. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/103.

For a different example of conceptions of education that are shaped by traditional norms, see this short video by Obi Owulu: CESA Africa. (2022, January 22). *Investigating the Historical Demand for Education in Nigeria - Chief Onyeama of Eke* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0j2P55Uz_MM.

For another perspective on the importance of educational visions that are developed locally, see remarks from interlocutor Wendy Kopp in [Chapter 5](#).

See, for example, Hong, Y., Morris, M. W., Chiu, C., & Benet-Martínez, V. (2000). Multicultural minds: A dynamic constructivist approach to culture and cognition. *American Psychologist*, 55(7), 709–720. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.7.709>.

the society, you know? It's never clear-cut as either traditional Chinese or Westernised. It's a mix of both.

And I think we are at a stage where we need to negotiate and find the space for both the teachers and students to feel comfortable in striking a balance between self-expression and honouring or being able to find connections with the more traditional Chinese culture. I think we are now trying to do that, but it's still in the making, so to speak. Because of the recent sociopolitical developments, not only in schools but the whole society is still searching for a way that people who hold different views, who are different stakeholders will still feel comfortable together. I don't know whether I'm being very abstract in explaining this. Feel free to ask questions.

Varied (but equally clear) definitions of good schools and good teachers

YUE-YI

Actually, something that I'd be curious to hear about from both of you is: in the contexts that you've talking about, who decides what is a good norm and what is a bad norm? Of course, it's very likely that this isn't explicitly articulated. But what's the basis for deciding what is good and what is bad in relation to education and teachers?

MASOODA

See, in all these contexts, whether it's Nigeria, Pakistan, India, Indonesia—again, all of them have traditional roots that are still quite strong—the society really appreciates a teacher who is committed. They know how to recognise a committed teacher, and then that person gets a lot of respect. Like those students I was telling you about, who identified some of the teachers who have been very important for them. They held these teachers in so much respect, and the relationship develops in a way which is very different than the relationships with teachers in the West: the bond is described, partly, in spiritual terms. And they'll say that, "Oh, this teacher has become like my parents." And in our language there are very sort of strong words for that—in English that's not conveying how strong the emotional bond they feel with this teacher can be, the indebtedness they feel to this teacher.

And if it's a rural area, and if the school principal is very committed, then first the students, and then their parents and the community in turn, will bring gifts to the principal. The community recognises a teacher or a principal who is devoted to the school. Because you can tell: he'd be here to hear their complaints or to satisfy them, and to do all that you expect from a good teacher. So even though the community might not have any idea of what the exam results are—that's a different debate, about improving learning outcomes and all of that—but as long as the child is moving to

the next grade and the child can read a letter or a newspaper for the parents, they all observe that that is happening.

I've never had a situation where the community doesn't know which school, in their view, is a good school, and which is a bad school. And that's a lot to do with the kind of teachers they see in those schools: they're around, they're visible, the students go home and they talk nicely about the teacher to the parents. So it's not very difficult for the community and the parent, and the students to recognise the norms of what's expected of a good teacher—and, actually, all the norms are non-financial. In fact, a teacher who is very financially motivated will not draw any of this respect from the community, because they will say, "Well, fine, this is a commercial transaction." On the other hand, the community can end up really developing a very strong bond with the teacher, which stays beyond education—a lot of the students gave examples of bringing gifts to the teacher, even 10 years later, just like they do it for the parents. And that is a very Eastern kind of cultural tradition, and it's still strong. And financial incentives have very little to do with that kind of conception.

YUE-YI

That sounds like a much more social and relational vision.

MASOODA

Yes.

YUE-YI

Ying-yi, anything to add on this question of who decides what is a good norm and what is a bad norm?

YING-YI

Well, who decides is hard to say, but I just want to respond to Masooda's description, where we actually bear a lot of similarities in terms of the clear recognition of which schools are good and which are bad. In that regard, in Hong Kong, there are school bandings. So there are good schools, and there is high consensus about which school is good—and which school is not so good and is lower in the banding. Also, public examinations are very important in Hong Kong. In order to get into colleges or universities, and to get into the subjects that you want to study in these colleges and universities, you need to compete. So having good scores in public exams is very important. If you look at all these instrumental outcomes, then there is quite a high consensus in terms of the type of schools that will produce students who can get into the top faculty or subjects in the top university.

And then within a school—again, based on the teachers' behaviours and their performance—you can differentiate who are high-performing teachers versus not-

For a related discussion on local perceptions of which schools are good and bad, see the opening exchange between interlocutors Maria Teresa Tatto and David Evans in [Chapter 11](#).

so-high-performing teachers. All those are quite clearly defined in terms of, again, academic performance, so there are clear perceptions.

On who decides on good versus bad norms, that's a little bit tricky. If you just look at the outcomes, like student performance, those are objective. You can count them and you can look at the numbers, right? But if we look at the political side, as I discussed earlier, then it's hard. Because, basically, now the Hong Kong government defines a lot of what is seen as politically correct to say, but of course the general public might also have a different opinion. So I think we now have much lower consensus in terms of what is politically seen as good norms versus bad norms in that regard. But for student performance, then that part is quite clear.

YUE-YI

That's so interesting for me to think about, because I have lived in and attended school both in Malaysia, where there is a lot of contestation of norms partly because it's a multiethnic country, and also in Singapore, which in some ways is culturally similar but instead has very high consensus around norms.

YING-YI

That's true.

Top-down pressure from self-interested government officials and from high stakes exams

YUE-YI

So I want to move to the "how" question, which is, how can norms be reoriented? In the context of RISE, we think a lot about how teacher norms can be oriented towards system improvement in education. And Masooda, for this question it would be great if you could talk a bit about your paper on the CARE Foundation work in contesting anti-work norms. Ying-yi, feel free to comment in any direction, even if it's not about the system level, but even your lab work on how cultural primes can change people's behaviour—I think that'd be very interesting for the big political questions.

MASOODA

For those who have not read the anti-work culture paper, it's a study which is telling us that there's a pervasive anti-work culture where teachers do not teach in the classroom, but they want to collect their salary. So they either don't turn up at school, or they send somebody else in their place where they can get away with it,

Bano, M. (2022). Beating the 'Anti-Work' Culture: Lessons from a Successful Attempt to Improve Performance in State Schools in Pakistan. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/105. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2022/105.

or even if they are in the school then they don't turn up in the classroom. It's that bad. And a lot of developing-country context—not just South Asian areas, but also African countries—have different examples of high teacher absenteeism, or teachers not physically in the classroom even if they're in the school.

For more on the factors underlying teacher absenteeism, see interlocutor Laura Savage's remarks in [Chapter 15](#).

YING-YI

May I ask why? Why aren't the teachers going into the classrooms?

MASOODA

So that's a very interesting question. In efficient systems—like I can imagine in Hong Kong—it's a given that you will at least do the minimum teaching, even if you're not doing it at the best of levels. But in a lot of countries, the state bureaucracy is so perverse, in a way, that the mindset is, "I'm getting my salary, but why work?" So a lot of these teachers and principals will sit there drinking tea or having long conversations, rather than being in the class. And they'll ridicule the teachers who want to teach, "Why are you working? These children are from poor backgrounds, they won't learn anyway." Or, "Why are you trying to be so efficient?"

I agree, on a human level, that there's the other question of: why be so inefficient? We all want to draw some satisfaction from our job. But in a lot of these contexts, the teachers and principals want to get away without working, because working requires some effort. It's a culture where you find teachers asking students to make tea for them, to massage their feet. Do you understand? I myself am always puzzled about, "What's happening in the mind of these people? Why not at least do the basics?" But it's not happening, and this is established not just in my work, but it's a widely recorded fact.

So the next question is: why is this culture pervasive? It's also linked to a context where a lot of teaching appointments are still awarded on political grounds, and so a lot of teachers are not recruited on basis of their competence or their commitment or their ability to be a good teacher. These are state government positions that the politicians can grant as a favour to their constituencies.

For similar observations on contexts where teaching positions are allocated as political rewards, see remarks from interlocutors Barbara Tournier in [Chapter 13](#) and David Evans in [Chapter 11](#).

But if you're stuck in this kind of momentum, how do you change it? And the problem I'm finding from the particular case study is that in pervasive anti-work culture, you try to actually demotivate those who do work. Because if your colleagues work, then then things can improve, and our community can come and say, "This class is doing very well. Why aren't the other teachers working?" They don't want to face the pressure, so they ridicule those teachers to ensure nobody really works.

The issue is that the next tier of governance should be holding them accountable—so district officials are meant to give scrutiny and all of that. But this paper ends up in a slightly frustrating note, which is that we don't see a way out. Because what we're finding, with this particular case of the organisation I was looking at in Pakistan that was trying to support the state schools, is that even if they improve the norms

within a school—by introducing a certain level of accountability, by doing school visits, by providing a teacher of their own who keeps an eye on the other teachers and motivates them through goodwill to start working—then the problem is that at the district government level, there is not much acceptance of these high-performing schools. Because if this organisation is able to make the same low-performing school become high-performing in terms of education, then it puts pressure on the district government to improve the other schools as well. Do you understand? If one school can improve, why not the other school?

And what we are realising is that this problem of anti-work culture goes across the tiers, because the experience of this organisation is that as soon as a school becomes good, the district government officials want to take it over and turn it back to the old system. So the challenge that this paper poses is: can you really have the short route of accountability from communities to frontline providers and bottom-up improvement, when perhaps the culture has to change from the top? Incentives are set by the national government. So if politicians at the top are corrupt, then taking bribes becomes the way to do things. And if the top levels of bureaucracy are not interested in having an efficient system, then the whole system becomes perverse—so how do you then expect the lower tiers to improve?

So in terms of this whole debate about bottom-up accountability and mobilising communities and decentralisation, my papers are saying that, frankly, the scenario that international development agencies have in their minds is a bit too optimistic. Bottom-up accountability has inherent limits in contexts where top-down accountability is not working. I'm 100 percent sure that if tomorrow the national government gets fixed and says, "We want education improved," then the middle tier will improve, and the teachers will have to be in school. But in an inefficient bureaucracy, it's quite rational to behave the way these teachers are behaving—why work when there's no credit given for high performance, really? So my view is that changing norms is quite difficult in this context.

YING-YI

I think in Hong Kong we have a different problem. Corruption and accountability aren't so much our issue nowadays. It's more about what I mentioned before that, for example, learning becomes driven by public examination scores or marks. And so oftentimes when students come to school, they don't find it fun to learn or to study. For them, it is not really a pleasant thing to do, because they have to come and study hard, and studying hard is for a very marks-driven, extrinsic type of motivation. So, nowadays in Hong Kong, there are new programmes that help children to learn in a happy way—to teach them how to see learning as an enjoyable task and also to reduce the mindset of entity theory. Yue-Yi, I'm sure you've heard about entity versus incremental theories of intelligence.

Especially because the stakes are high in terms of examination outcomes, which leads to the teacher the school and parents pushing the students to get high scores, so

For some examples where district-level or other middle-tier education officials instead play a role in instructional leadership, see Childress, D., Chimier, C., Jones, C., Page, E., & Tournier, B. (2020). *Change agents: Emerging evidence on instructional leadership at the middle tier*. UNESCO IIEP; Education Development Trust; Education Commission. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374918>. For an interview with Barbara Tournier, who co-authored the report, see [Chapter 13](#).

For more on the short route of accountability, see Pritchett, L. (2015). *Creating Education Systems Coherent for Learning Outcomes*. RISE Working Paper Series. 15/005. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2015/005.

For a discussion of the interplay between ministry influence and school-level change, and of rapid educational expansions that can lead to an organisational culture in which education is not taken seriously, see Luis Crouch's remarks in [Chapter 12](#).

Entity and incremental theories of intelligence are popularly known as "fixed mindset" and "growth mindset" respectively. For an overview of psychologist Carol Dweck's work on these mindset differences, see <https://stanfordmag.org/contents/why-mindset-matters>.

I think many children might also see the scores as reflecting their inborn intelligence. So when they meet setbacks, they will feel helpless, and then their motivation will be lowered as a consequence. But now there are programmes that help to instil a growth mindset among students—and also among teachers as well. Some teachers also hold an entity view about intelligence, so they might think, you know, that students who are not doing well in school might not be that smart anyway, so they don't put time toward teaching them. Because of this, the growth mindset needs to be taught to teachers as well, so that they hold very different attitudes towards the students who are not performing well.

So this is what is happening in Hong Kong now. And I think the atmosphere in classrooms now is very different from the time when I was a high school student. In old days, there is less creativity in terms of teachers or instruction in the classroom. But nowadays, they encourage that a lot. I think that's a positive change.

Shared beliefs as an entry point for mobilising volunteers and for analysing culture

YUE-YI

That's definitely encouraging. We have five minutes left, so I want to ask both of you for any last words you'd like to leave us with—whether that's a thought that occurred to you during the conversation that you just didn't have the chance to share, or any just big point that you want me to remember as I work on this project.

But before that, I just wanted to say it's been really interesting for me to see that even though the contexts that you study are so different, there are at least two big-picture similarities between them. One is that classroom, schools, and the teaching profession are a domain where there is a lot of tension and competition between different norms and different sources of value. The other is that influences from the higher levels of the system—whether political changes and exam standards, or bureaucratic expectations and longstanding religious principles—deeply affect these lower on the ground level. It's really interesting to see that reflected consistently across these two very different contexts.

Any last words from either of you, briefly?

MASOODA

Oh, let me quickly mention one thing that that we're finding across the RISE studies about teacher motivation issue, which is that there are so many teachers who volunteer from within the community on a very regular basis. We see this in my paper on how Pratham mobilised the community, and even in my paper on low-cost tuition

See also [Chapter 3](#) for interlocutor Shwetlena Sabarwal's observations on the belief that there is nothing a teacher can do to help certain children who have fallen behind curricular expectations.

For related observations on the interplay between exam-orientedness and creativity in the classroom, see the opening examples from interlocutors Juliet Wajega in [Chapter 13](#) and Katlego Sengadi in [Chapter 6](#) on their experiences as teachers in Uganda and Botswana, respectively.

Bano, M. & Oberoi, Z. (2020). Embedding Innovation in State Systems: Lessons from Pratham in India. RISE Working Paper Series. 20/058. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2020/058.

providers and community providers that do charge a small fee but are teaching within the community to poor. And across these different papers, I can see that there's a lot of potential in these developing countries to draw on people in the community—like in the example I already gave of volunteer teachers in northern Nigeria who are motivated more by religious incentives but are teaching secular subjects.

There's a lot of potential to draw on these motivations if you want to have a mass education movement that goes beyond state schooling. Because in these big societies, there are a lot of people around who have an education but who are not employed formally, so a lot of people are willing to volunteer or to work for small payments—like with this low-cost tuition provider that is charging students very little, like 200 or 300 rupees—so you can bring them together if you want a social movement for mass education. But somehow there's a big mismatch between what society can potentially do because of the motivation to teach that exists within many people, and what the state is able to mobilise.

YUE-YI

Thanks. Ying-yi, go ahead.

YING-YI

Actually, I think I expressed everything that I can think of. Do you have any questions for me?

YUE-YI

A final question, then: from a cultural psychologist's point of view, what would a future research agenda for improving the understanding of teacher norms look like?

YING-YI

So the way that I study culture is to look at shared beliefs. Nowadays, as I mentioned, oftentimes the concern among teachers is about self-censorship. It's not really explicit rule, but what they anticipate or what they think the different stakeholders like their students or parents are expecting them to do. So from my perspective, to understand culture, you need to understand shared beliefs and values.

YUE-YI

Mm hmm. That's really useful. And one other interviewee said something like, "Well, norms are basically shared beliefs about other people's shared beliefs, aren't they?"

Paraphrased from interlocutor Dan Honig's remarks in [Chapter 4](#).

YING-YI

Yes, exactly. I think that's true as well.

CHAPTER 10

On varied perceptions, gradual change, and how norms are nested in different levels of the system

Melanie Ehren & Michael Woolcock

Melanie Ehren is a Professor in Educational Governance and Director of the research institute LEARN! at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and an Honorary Professor at the UCL Institute of Education. Her academic work focuses on the effectiveness of accountability and evaluation systems and aims to contribute to a greater understanding of the interplay between accountability and the broader education system in tackling inequality and improving student outcomes. Her key projects include an ESRC-funded study on “Accountability, capacity and trust to improve learning outcomes in South Africa” and an EU-funded comparative study on the impact of school inspections in six European countries.



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This conversation took place on 8 December 2021.

YUE-YI

I’m just going to jump in with the first question, if that’s all right. Can you tell us about a story or an experience or an anecdote, or example that illustrates how norms, whether among teachers, or among other bureaucrats, or just people in general, can

affect behaviour or practice in ways that aren't very well predicted by formal rules, or by conventional game theory models or whatever.

MELANIE

I can give two examples, but I'm happy for you to start, Michael.

MICHAEL

You can go. You're the real professional on this stuff.

MELANIE

I'm not sure about that, but we'll see! My thinking around this question comes from two projects I've worked on. One is a project in South Africa that is related to the book on trust, accountability, and capacity building that I co-edited with Jacqueline Baxter. The project is still running, and we're trying to understand how teachers engage with external accountability and how trust influences that interaction. What we see there is how national and provincial governments have tried and are still trying to implement structures for professional accountability, where teachers are reviewed by a peer and their headteacher in their classroom, which should lead to a personal professional development plan that would then lead to improvement of their teaching practices. That review also informs a performance pay element, where they get a salary increment when the review is positive. So that's the formal structure of professional accountability in South Africa.

But what we see is that this isn't actually leading to improvement, because what happens is that teachers don't really trust each other. And that distrust keeps them from being open about their views on someone else, like their views on whether and how other teachers can be improving their behaviour. So they will just give each other very positive reviews rather than engaging in a professional conversation, because there is not a culture of trust that would allow them to do that—and also because they sometimes understand trust as something that is about reciprocating favours in a wider context of distrust in external accountability, which would lead them to collude in a kind of interaction where they would just give each other positive reviews. And this has become a norm within the school context. So that's the first story.

The second story is about a project in the EU that I led a couple of years ago where we did a comparative study on school inspection models in eight different countries, looking at how inspections of schools lead to improvement. And what we found is that inspections operate through a mechanism that we call "setting expectations". So, even though there is formal legislation in place about what teachers are expected to do or how schools are expected to operate, what drives performance in the schools and countries that were part of our study is actually what is in the inspection framework. Sometimes these are the same as what's in the formal legislation. But oftentimes

Ehren, M., & Baxter, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Trust, Accountability and Capacity in Education System Reform: Global Perspectives in Comparative Education*. Routledge. <https://business-school.open.ac.uk/research/projects/trust-capacity-and-accountability/book>.

See <http://www.schoolinspections.eu/>.

inspections standards are a bit broader than the legislation, or a bit more specific, or they target other areas that are not regulated.

And because schools are evaluated on these standards, that's what drives their behaviour. Not just due to the inspection itself, but also because other stakeholders in the education system use those standards in conversations with schools—whether it's parents who use those standards in conversations with schools or in decisions about school enrolment; or other organisations who are working with schools in supporting school improvement who use those standards; or publishers who sell self-evaluation packets or school management systems. All of that gets organised around some of these inspection standards, including professional development and how headteachers would rate performance of their teachers. So, you see, the system organises itself around those inspection or accountability standards. And that trickles down into the classroom to affect teacher behaviour as well. Those are the two examples I want to leave you with for now.

YUE-YI

Thank you for those. That second example also makes me think about how it's often the exams that set the classroom lesson agenda rather than curriculum. And for the first one, when you were describing the professional accountability structure, I could just sense that there was a “but ...” on the horizon.

MELANIE

I can also put in a “but” related to the second example. In RISE work, there's a lot of talk around alignment of systems to improve learning. So, essentially, that mechanism of setting expectations is creating that kind of alignment. And the “but” is that these expectations in inspection standards and exam standards also lead to narrowing of curriculum and teaching, particularly when that becomes increasingly high-stakes. Then you see teachers and schools focusing narrowly on certain areas of performance, such as a narrow set of tested skills or one type of instructional model in the classroom, and other types of practices or outcomes then get ignored.

See, for example, Kaffenberger, M., & Spivack, M. (2022). System Coherence for Learning: Applications of the RISE Education Systems Framework. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/086. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISEWP_2022/086/.

YUE-YI

Yes, that's so true. Michael, over to you for a story.

Localised and systemwide factors, and highs and lows in teacher norms

MICHAEL

My best example comes from a big World Bank study that I was part of a few years ago, looking at service delivery in the Middle East and North Africa region. I was very pleased to be part of an extraordinary team that was nearly an entirely female team besides me. It was so great for many different reasons—but, in direct response to your question, from a nerdy researcher point of view, the Middle East is really great to study because so much of the policies are very centralised. You have singular schools of education that are that are producing teachers, and they all are functioning under the same rules. So all the things that you would normally focus on in research—the structures; the incentives, financial and otherwise; the curriculum—that obviously have a major role in shaping what people do—all those are “constant”, so to speak. But yet what emerged very quickly from the data that we had was that there was wide heterogeneity in terms of the outcomes that these otherwise similar systems were producing. And why is that?

Well, take something really basic like showing up for work. Every school or every administrative system in the world has an implicit and an explicit policy that you show up for work five days a week and do your job. But there was big diversity even in this most elementary aspect of professional life. When you looked at attendance rates on whether teachers were showing up for work, it was like a version of the 80/20 rule. We would have variations from 80 percent of places where people showed up every day, to places where only 20 percent of the people showed up every day. We presented numerous graphs of all these different countries where that was the split, and yet the rules across schools were identical. And this pattern was clear not just in national data, but at lower levels, all the way down to local districts.

When our team did fieldwork in these high and low-attendance places, there was just an entirely different set of normative expectations that both school leaders and community members had set regarding “what happens around here”. In some places, what happens around here is that “we don’t really care whether you show up for work or not, because we know that we’re going to get paid no matter what we do.” In other places, however, the prevailing view was, “We are the only hope these kids have for a better life. We’re going to use these five or six hours each day to try and create a different world of expectations and learning for them.”

Sometimes I still get teary when I think about one particular school we went to in Palestine—in a small town where about two-thirds of the fathers are either dead or in prison or just not present in the lives of their kids. And yet this school was just magical—somehow it was able to be a high-functioning school in the midst of a warzone, creating and sustaining a world in which teachers and parents were really committed to making sure their kids got to school every day, and where the wider

Brixi, H., Lust, E., & Woolcock, M. (2015). *Trust, Voice, and Incentives: Learning from Local Success Stories in Service Delivery in the Middle East and North Africa*. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-0456-4>.

For more on the influence of informal norms compared to formal policy, see remarks by interlocutor Margarita Gómez in [Chapter 5](#). For more on the importance of school-level culture, see remarks by interlocutor Wendy Kopp, also in [Chapter 5](#).

The 80/20 rule applies to outcomes for which 80 percent of the consequences come from 20 percent of the causes, e.g., 80 percent of sales coming from 20 percent of clients. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto_principle.

community also had a strong stake in ensuring that high-quality standards were met—for example, community committees had an active role in hiring teachers for the school and informally monitoring teacher performance.

It was very clear that school performance was powerfully shaped by the extent to which these different nested communities aligned and reinforced one another—the wider township, the school itself, and the classroom. In the Palestinian town I am referring to, a positive alignment had been built so that all of those different spaces were complemented and reinforced one another. But you can't really engineer that. You can write nice policies for encouraging it. But you've really got to live it and breathe it and experience it just to see what it's really like when the entire micro-level normative world has been structured, curated, and maintained over a long enough period of time so that these kids are having qualitatively different classroom experiences to those that are just a few miles away but who might as well be in a different country. In those latter schools, where there isn't a positive alignment across these three levels, one finds all those unhappy outcomes that you guys at RISE have documented—being in school for six or seven years and not being able to read a newspaper headline. In the narrow space of education “policy”, schools have the same structures, and teachers have the same training and material incentives, but the outcomes are very different.

The other thing that came out from that work—and Melanie touched on this earlier—is the role of school inspectors. In my experience, such people are perceived as older teachers who are doing routine administrative work while marking time until they get their pension. As such, they are not usually part of the normal conversation about what makes for strong education systems or what makes for strong social norms in the classroom. But in this particular school in Palestine, and the broader school district in which it was located, it was clear that these inspectors also played a key role. They were really animated, saying, in effect, “Look, we are interlocutors between this thing called ‘policy’ and the actual practice of teachers. So we take very seriously how we interpret curriculum and examinations and all of this, and how we choose the right people to be in the right schools, and how we mentor the principals because it's a hard job. Principals are mostly just criticised for the things that go wrong rather than praised for the things that go right, so how can we create a whole different culture around what's recognised and rewarded by these principals?”

It was just magical to be in that Palestinian school with those kids. No doubt they had some warning that we were coming, but there wasn't any attempt to put on a happy face and show how great their school was; it was just, “Jump on board and see what we do here every day.” And so we jumped on board and had this terrific day. When I asked the standard questions to the kids there, such as “What do you want to be when you grow up?”, one of the kids looked at me said, “I really want to be an accountant.” I thought, “Ah, now I know you're being honest.” It wasn't like, “I want to be a rocket scientist, or a doctor.” So I said to that student, “That's great; good for you! We need better accountants in the world, because you'll be able to track the money that flows through our societies and our financial systems, and make sure that we have an efficient and honest use of our resources.” At 16 years old, I think you have

See, for example, Silberstein, J. (2021). Measuring, Visualising, and Simulating Solutions to the Learning Crisis: New Evidence from Learning Profiles in 18 Countries. 2021/029. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-RI_2021/029. For an interactive data visualisation on this topic, see the UNESCO GEM Report's *Scoping Progress in Education* website: <https://www.education-progress.org/en/articles/trajectories>.

to be in a really good school to even understand what an accountant is, and then to be able to recognise why that seemingly unglamorous task is very necessary. And for certain types of people, of course, it's exactly what they love doing and should be doing.

That was a really powerful learning experience for me: being in a region where you have this consistency of policy, of structure, of curriculum, of training, of material incentives—and yet this crazy heterogeneity with respect to how it all plays out because of the role of social norms, or more accurately, an alignment of positive social norms reinforced across different levels of the education system.

YUE-YI

Wonderful, thank you so much. And the combination of stories from both of you has gotten us well into the “*what*” question, which is: in the contexts that you’ve worked in, what are some of the most influential norms that shape teacher practice or the practice of other frontline service providers? Were there any other social, organisational, or professional norms that you wanted to get on the table, besides issues like trust, and shared vision or lack thereof, and embeddedness?

MELANIE

As I was reflecting on Michael’s story, I was thinking back to some of the countries that I have worked in. In some of the more developed countries, we tend to talk about teaching as being a calling, a kind of public service that you go into because you want to help children move forward in life. And coming back to South Africa, what I found really interesting is that there was not a shared or common value of teaching in some of the schools that I worked in. In trying to understand that by talking to colleagues there, what came out really strongly is how the economic context acts as an explanation for this. Teaching is a very secure profession there, as it is in many other countries. And in South Africa a change in teacher training at some point also meant that it was quite easy to get into the profession, through doing an online degree that you could get into quite easily and also graduate from quite easily, according to some of the more experienced teachers who had been educated before the change. So becoming a teacher just seemed an easy pathway into a secure profession. And in a context where jobs are scarce, and where people struggle to get by, that leads to quite a different core for the profession, where becoming a teacher is more about securing a way to make a living.

Also, some of these schools are not the kinds of safe places that we would assume them to be in some of the more developed countries. Examples of which are schools in rural communities where there is quite a lot of drug and alcohol addiction, also of young pregnant woman whose children may have fetal alcohol syndrome and come into school with learning deficits and also behavioural deficits. And someone also explained to me how this can also mean that when they grow older and become

For other examples where financial stability amid limited job opportunities plays a major role in decisions to enter the teaching profession, see remarks from interlocutors Katlego Sengadi in [Chapter 6](#), Soufia Siddiqi in [Chapter 8](#), and Luis Crouch in [Chapter 12](#).

teenagers, they may have quite loose sexual morals, which can create quite a violent or insecure situation for female teachers in the classroom.

So it's a combination of, on the one hand, an economic system that would lead to a teaching profession that doesn't necessarily see itself as a life calling, and then combined with having to actually teach in a school that is not a safe place and where there is not a lot of trust—so you just try and make it through the day. And you do what was needed to get paid.

Nestedness, path dependency, and changing norms by setting an example

MICHAEL

I'll offer two things that are extensions of what I said before. One is the idea of "nestedness" (or embeddedness)—which is also an extension of what Melanie is saying—which is that you're always dealing with multiple little ecosystems that are interacting with each other. So as much as you truly want to be this fabulous teacher in your own little classroom, every one of the people in those classrooms is coming from their own little ecosystem; and your school itself is embedded in a community ecosystem. So it's a "Russian dolls" kind of phenomenon, where all these ecosystems are overlapping. And each of us, as individuals, can only control so much.

Many years ago, back in Australia, I was part of a team working with some teenagers who had had a really hard life. And a large part of our approach was what we called tone setting. That entailed being very clear with these kids, saying and demonstrating that, "If we're going to be in this room, if we're going to hang out with all these different people together, then this is what it's going to be like when we are together, this is how we're going to treat each other." Setting the normative code, so to speak. Today my wife and I still work with several teenagers each year who are from pretty disadvantaged or unhappy family backgrounds of one kind or another. For so many of these kids, being yelled at is normal, or swearing is just a normal part of dinner conversation, or interrupting other people when they're speaking is normal. The main thing that we do, really, is just try and set very different expectations about turn taking, about the language you use when you talk to each other—if we disagree, we try and articulate why we're disagreeing, but we don't treat it as a nuclear war. So this tone setting, I think, is really crucial.

And that's all about norms, right? It's just saying, "This is how in we're going to do things in this little slice of the universe. It may not be how you do things in other places, but we're going to try it here." It's a wager with yourself and with everybody else that if you stick at it long enough, across these multiple nested levels, and deal with the inevitable violations of those norms—and with the sometimes quite dispiriting setbacks that occur along the way—then somehow magic will happen. And that a very

According to Spohr's (2018) account of fetal alcohol syndrome: "The most common morphological signs and clinical abnormalities associated with FAS in late childhood and adolescence are: dysmorphic facial features; weight gain; learning difficulties [and] school failure; vocational training problems; inappropriate sexual behaviour; criminal behaviour/problems with the law; mental health problems, primarily ADHD and depression; lacking independence; limited contractual capability" (pp. 75–76). Spohr, H.-L. (2018). *Fetal alcohol syndrome: A lifelong challenge*. De Gruyter.

different kind of routine, and almost a different kind of person, will emerge as a result, such that you can eventually wager that (a) it that will stick, and (b) it will earn its legitimacy because it is a functionally better way of doing things. It just creates a much more creative and respectful and enjoyable and less stressful environment for people to be in. Hopefully they will come to feel that in their bones and will actually start look forward to being part of that kind of community, and perhaps, in time, creating one of their own.

There's no formula for that. This social stuff doesn't have a neat formula, an $E=mc^2$, next to it, such that you can just press a button and watch beautiful stuff happen. It has to be painstakingly constructed in the face of a lot of indifference or opposition, in the sense of competing with what's normal and normative in other people's lives. And, as Melanie was suggesting, if a teacher is doing that alone, the sustained pressure of trying to change what is normal and normative for others can eventually break you. What any individual teacher does has to be undertaken as part of something bigger. The teachers need to have that sense that there is positive tone setting in the school—mostly set by the principal—about what it means to be part of this larger community, and how we learn to get along.

MELANIE

The point about nested levels is a really good one. In the book I mentioned, we also try to understand trust, capacity, accountability through that lens of nested levels; using Bronfenbrenner's model about how learning and development is situated in the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. So he situates children's learning in a classroom and home environment, in a school context, in an education system.

The chronosystem also brings in another relevant dimension, which is time. Norms develop over time. And there is a kind of path dependency in how norms develop, because if teachers have been taught in a dysfunctional school themselves, then that's their experience of what's normal, to some extent. And children who have been taught in a school like that will also have those expectations of teaching. So people need good examples to change that path dependency.

YUE-YI

Thank you. As we keep the conversation going, I just wanted to flag that we've gotten quite far both into the "why" and the "how" questions, which look at why certain norms emerge, and why some norms remain while others dwindle—and you've brought in issues of dynamics over time and of legitimacy there. And then you both also started to get into the question of how norms can be reoriented for systemwide improvement in education—with Melanie mentioning examples to shift path dependency and Michael discussing tone-setting. Any more thoughts on the "why" or the "how", or any responses to each other? The floor is completely open.

For more of Michael's thoughts on a related topic, see Woolcock, M., & Narayan, D. (2000). Social Capital: Implications for Development Theory, Research, and Policy. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 15(2), 225–249. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/15.2.225> (open-access version: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/961231468336675195/Social-capital-implications-for-development-theory-research-and-policy>).

Melanie and her co-author discuss Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of human development in Ehren, M., & Baxter, J. (2021). Trust, accountability and capacity: Three building blocks of education system reform. In M. Ehren & J. Baxter (Eds.), *Trust, Accountability and Capacity in Education System Reform: Global Perspectives in Comparative Education* (pp. 1–29). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429344855-11>. See also Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992). Ecological systems theory. In *Six theories of child development: Revised formulations and current issues* (pp. 187–249). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

For a related observation on the influence of teachers' own schooling experiences, see interlocutor Kwame Akyeampong's remarks in [Chapter 12](#).

The importance of multilevel, context-specific interventions—and an example of a nested system

MELANIE

To build on the point about how to change norms, it really requires looking at all of the levels in that ecosystem, and where you actually need to intervene in multiple levels to really make a change. I don't think that any single approach—in terms of improving professional development or initial teacher training or introducing greater accountability or increasing salary or what have you—will work on its own. So it really needs a multidimensional approach.

What that will look like will vary across contexts, depending on what kinds of norms you want to improve, where that needs to be done, and in which particular context—because each country will have different ecosystems within the country as well. So it requires a good understanding of how teachers are functioning within each country—whether they're in well-aligned communities like Michael was talking about, or in different types of ecosystems with different types of norms that need improvement—and an understanding of why those norms contexts are the way they are. And then it takes thinking about how to address all of that in a multidimensional, multilevel approach.

MICHAEL

Yes, I think the essence of social science is that it's about structure, agency, and contingency. Structure refers to these big systems that create their own incentives and imperatives to function in particular ways. Then there's agency, or the fact that, in spite of or sometimes because of those very imperatives and structures, we still have agency, we still make choices, we can still exercise our own volition. And I think part of the way forward is to figure out how to function on both of those levels alongside contingency, which is just the fact that both big and small stuff happens that you can't control.

MELANIE

Absolutely.

MICHAEL

I want to give another example, though, of a country with this really wonderfully nested approach to thinking about education. It's actually coming from the time when I was based in Malaysia to help set up the World Bank's office there. Singapore, at that time, was the home to UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence

(2012–2018), and I was invited down there several times to contribute to these big meetings with officials from different countries that they hosted from time to time, as international agencies do. If you’ve done anything in development, you know that these are often rather performative exercises. You have this nice little show that you put on for everybody, in which you show how fantastic you are at what you’re doing. But sometimes, unusually, they don’t do that. At such gathering in China, for example, they didn’t take guests to see a flashy new industrial park or university campus but instead took us on a tour of new sewage system. And they said, “You know, our cities are growing really fast, and we’re going to get horrible diseases if we don’t figure out what to do with our sewage systems.” And I thought, “You guys are going to be great. You understand what development is about.” Like the student in the Palestinian school that wants to be an accountant—if you want to create a prosperous and healthy society, you’ve got to do the nuts-and-bolts stuff well; you’ve got to build and implement both unglamorous and glamorous systems.

Back to my gathering in Singapore. Here too our hosts opted not to show us the glamorous things, such as the new Yale University campus that they host, eschewing an obvious opportunity to show us the prestigious academic company they now keep. But what did they show us? They opened with a very modest speech, the essence of which was, “Well, if you don’t know too much about Singapore, what you probably do know is that our education systems has this really strong examination system,”—and so on—“And it’s pretty clear where every student in Singapore sits in that distribution of exam scores. But we decided that today we are going to take you to a campus in the post-secondary education system for kids that finish in the bottom 20 percent.”

Our host continues. “You probably arrived here in Singapore through Changi International Airport,”—which is a really nice place. “Let me show you where we train all the people that clean that place, that organise all of the flights and make sure that the major entertainment systems keep running.” So they took us out to the equivalent of a community college for an afternoon, and it was just unbelievable. I was teary. I’m an emotional guy, and I couldn’t stop thinking: “Wow. This is why you’re great. It’s not because you got the smartest kids in the world. It’s because you treat the bottom part of your distribution—those students with the least prestige and opportunity—with dignity and with equal resources to become the best they can be no matter where they are.” The staff had enormous pride in saying, “Here’s how we teach people how to be good textile workers. Here’s how we teach people how to clean an aeroplane quickly.” This work is unglamorous, with low professional prestige, but in its own way, crucial to making an array of integrated systems work; as such, it’s crucial that those doing that kind of work not only do it well but are recognized for the key contributions they make. In Singapore, it seems, the people who do that work, and the schools where they teach people how to do it, are regarded with dignity and respect. In this context, the education system doesn’t abandon you if you struggle on one metric of educational “success”, but rather provides well-funded and carefully implemented alternative career paths. You’re still able to contribute to something bigger, and your society will still value your contribution, even if it’s much less prestigious than what others might do.

For an example of such educational offerings in Singapore, see <https://www.ite.edu.sg/courses/course-finder/course/work-study-diploma-in-airport-operations>.

I think that's a nice example of a truly nested system. It's manifest in other aspects of Singapore as well—like these ads on the trains, with big posters of all the people who are cleaning the trains and fixing the rail tracks at 3 o'clock in the morning. So that you, dear rider, that you can have this nice travel experience and arrive on time because there's a whole bunch of other people doing stuff in obscurity without being able to get a decent night's sleep so that you can get to work. Which is part of that whole ethos of sharing, "This is who we are, this is how we function." And, as it happens, it makes Singapore a rather prosperous society.

MELANIE

And there's this question of: how do you get there? How can we ensure that norms are being set around valuing everyone in society—because that's what you're also talking about, Michael—and around developing a child holistically rather than just to perform on a set of small or narrow metrics? That's the kind of question that people also often ask me, along the lines of: do you need to have a centralised approach or a more decentralised approach? Which tends to be the continuum that people think of. And I find that to be a very difficult question because it also depends on how heterogeneous a country is. If there is a wide variety of practices and capacities in a country, then a centralised approach isn't really going to work.

That's something that I saw in South Africa as well. They have tried to improve teaching and schooling there through implementing a very national centralised curriculum that was intensely monitored and scripted, where a teacher just has had to routinely follow a lesson table with a set of activities. That approach was developed with low-competence teachers in mind, to try and address poor performance. But everyone had to follow the scripted curriculum—even the teachers who are actually capable of designing their own curriculum and assessing student performance and then deciding on a set of activities to improve learning. And such an approach can be a real barrier for well-performing teachers to really use their skills to improve learning. It can also mean that poorly performing teachers are not encouraged or allowed to invest in their own development or supported to think about how to improve learning. Rather, they could think, "Okay, I just have to follow this script and then everything will be okay. And I'm being monitored on it anyway, so there is no real incentive to do anything apart from this."

So in terms of the "how" question of how to improve teacher norms, I guess that's an example of what you shouldn't be doing. It's really all about improving capacity in a context-specific manner.

The long journey of social norms change

MICHAEL

I'll just add to that. There are some really important issues for which there just has to be long-term, generational-level commitments in order for change to be realised. I'm thinking here about issues and programmes pertaining to gender equality, and about the initial cynicism around this in various quarters, especially in the governance space. Increasingly, there are requirements that certain numbers of seats on decision-making councils be allocated to women. When this was initially proposed, however, the response in many countries was predictable scepticism: "Well, these seats will just go to the wives of influential husbands, and they'll just do the bidding of their husbands." And the initial findings sometimes affirmed this concern.

But then it turned out that, because of these quotas, just having lots of screaming kids and young girls with their mothers in these meetings meant that these kids grew up with an entirely different norm regarding women's participation in public life. So now it's normal to have lots of women and their kids in meetings, but it took a generational change for those young girls to become women for whom the prevailing sentiment now is, "Why shouldn't we be here? We've been here all our lives!" So the evaluations of some of those gender equality programmes were, I think, often fairly modest in the short run. And then if you only had a short-run programme cycle or expectation or funding, then you'd think, "It didn't work. How disappointing." But in the longer run, the changes brought about by these gender equity requirements have been real and consequential.

So in the social norms space, perhaps we should expect there to be a mixture of things, some of which can change really fast and others that change really slowly. We now widely recognise the importance of *Thinking Fast and Slow*, so maybe a corollary is that you also have social norms changing fast and slow, or perhaps in a "punctuated equilibrium" manner in which a rapid change only occurs after long periods of apparent futility, or along a J-curve trajectory in which things better worse before they (maybe) get better. For some of the really longstanding norms, like gender inequality, the change process to gender equality has taken centuries—and you don't need me to tell you that it's still far from complete.

I think an extension of all this is that often there aren't quick fixes to changing social norms, but not because we don't try hard enough, aren't smart enough, or aren't funded enough, but because it really does take a long time for some norms to change, and often in a decidedly non-linear way. Even if some things can be fixed relatively quickly, in the social norms space they're not likely to be universal fixes that can be packaged into a nice little toolkit or into a programme such that if you mix it and stir it, then wonderful things will happen. The very essence of changing social norms is that you have to be doing that work in socially normative ways. And so the beauty and the frustration of doing work on social development issues is that there is a rarely a direct match between a problem and a solution, in the way that raising interest rates

For another example of children's presence alongside their mothers in professional contexts, see [Chapter 8](#) for interlocutor Soufia Siddiqi's description of a teacher training session in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Chattopadhyay, R., & Duflo, E. (2004). Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India, *Econometrica* 72(5): 1409-1443. See also Parthasarathy, R., Rao, V. & Palaniswamy, N., (2019). Deliberative democracy in an unequal world: A text-as-data study of South India's village assemblies. *American Political Science Review*, 113(3), pp.623-640. These and related studies stress the effects of gender quotas not just on what items are discussed, but how they are discussed and by whom final decisions are made.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

A key work on the pace of norms change is Bicchieri, C. (2017). *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. Oxford University Press.

by a quarter of a percentage point can help lower inflation. The world of social norms is a very different kind of space presenting very different kinds of challenges for our administrative systems to get their head around—to fund them, to evaluate them, to make claims about them. We revert very quickly into the imperatives of the structures that we’re all part of, and when we’re engaging with education reform it can be very hard to get money for this kind of work and to create space for even talking seriously about these kinds of things; it’s so much easier just to crank out new classrooms, distribute textbooks, worry about optimal student/teacher ratios, or give laptops to every child.

MELANIE

That’s very true.

MICHAEL

The normative aspects can be really crucial. But part of the paradox of trying to respond to these normative aspects, as I’ve noted above, is that they are not amenable to the dominant tools that we have available to us within the space of policy and practice. And these aren’t really things that you can teach. So a lot of it comes back to this perennial challenge we have at the Kennedy School: teaching leadership. Everybody’s worked in organisations that are really well-led and other ones that are really terribly led, but is there a formula for predicting which it will be from the outset? No. Leadership is one of those things that embodies all the challenges and the opportunities of reform—or protecting hard-won gains.

And if we’re serious about changing our education systems, a large part of that has to come from a team of people that are well led and are willing to stick at it not just for two or three years, but perhaps for twenty years, for an entire career and maybe multiple careers. And you see the fruits of that in countries that have been making those decades-long commitments. But if you’re starting now, you’ll feel like nothing is happening, probably for a long time. That means you’ve got to have very judicious decision-making structures and say, “Is nothing changing because everything we are doing is just really crappy and it’s never going to work? Or will it be like acorns that have to sit in the ground for a heck of a long time before they suddenly flourish and become an oak tree?”

A lot of these things around social norms are in that space. They take a long time to go down the runway before they eventually get enough momentum and take off. And I’m delighted that the RISE Programme is creating the space for this kind of discussion. It’s easier to just focus on test scores, attendance levels, amounts being spent, et cetera—all that easy-to-measure stuff. But we all know that social norms are crucial. It’s just that they’re crucial in ways that normal social science inherently struggles to deal with, and certainly our political and administrative systems struggle to deal with.

For more on the lack of quick fixes, see interlocutor Sharath Jeevan’s remarks on “wicked” problems in [Chapter 4](#).

For one empirical example of a decades-long commitment, see London, J. (2021). *Outlier Vietnam and the Problem of Embeddedness: Contributions to the Political Economy of Learning*. RISE Working Paper Series, 21/062. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2021/062 Author Jonathan London discusses this paper in a FreshEd podcast here: <https://freshedpodcast.com/london/>.

For more on the importance of deeply felt commitments, see interlocutor Luis Crouch’s remarks in [Chapter 12](#).

YUE-YI

I'm delighted by both that that affirmation and that challenge. And let's give the last two minutes to Melanie. Is there anything you thought along the way that you didn't get a chance to mention?

Four metaphors for how teachers perceive their schools

MELANIE

Yes, I have two final things to say. The first one is that I think it's also relevant to have a conversation about how we can reinforce norms. How do norms get reinforced over time within a particular ecosystem? We've talked about a number of examples of approaches that could reinforce norms, beyond just putting in place a centralised structure or set of policies.

The other point is that when I think about norms, I also think about some of the metaphor work that we're now currently doing in South Africa, where we're asking teachers about how they would describe their school. This is also a result of some of the case study work that we did there. And this work has led to four really different metaphors for how teachers describe their schools, which, to us, indicate a different set of forms and norms around teaching and learning as well. So some of the teachers will talk about the school as being a factory, where you just produce learners with high test outcomes. Another one would be the hospital metaphor, where teachers see it as, "Okay, the learners coming to us to be diagnosed with what they need in life. And we are the ones that decide about how to provide that for them." Then you have a metaphor for school that's really about the sense of being a community, where as a group of teachers you help to grow a child holistically. And then the fourth one, unfortunately, is where they talk about the school as being a warzone: they have to be there, but where they're just fighting over resources or time or political power. And so that comes with a really different understanding of what you're doing in terms of your teaching, or how you see your role in the school.

So what we're now trying to understand is what those metaphors also tell us about how teachers engage with professional accountability or other types of accountability, how trust functions in the school context, and also what they see as their most important role in school. No findings yet, but it's an interesting piece of work that will hopefully provide some further insights in this regard.

YUE-YI

I'll look forward to that study. I think narrative, metaphor, and all are so important to norms, especially in the local, nested articulations that we've been talking about.

For more on this, see Melanie's blog at <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/2022/05/10/family-factory-how-metaphors-help-make-sense-of-school-life/>. See also conceptions of teaching as labour, craft, profession, and art in Wise, A. E., Darling-Hammond, L., McLaughlin, M. W., & Bernstein, H. T. (1985). Teacher Evaluation: A Study of Effective Practices. *The Elementary School Journal*, 86(1), 61–121.

MICHAEL

I like those four metaphors too, and they can apply to lots of different things in life. And it's good to see them being articulated by other people as their own rendering of all these different worlds that they sometimes find themselves in.

MELANIE

Yes, absolutely.

CHAPTER 11

On accountability, teacher professional development, and the value and challenge of strengthening professional norms

David Evans & Maria Teresa Tatto

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YUE-YI

To get us started, could you share a story, experience, or an incident that illustrates how norms—whether among teachers or other groups of humans—can affect

behaviour or practice or outcomes in ways that might not be anticipated by formal rules, by market-oriented models, or by other types of prior expectations?

MARIA TERESA

One of the interesting things to me is how parents select schools, and how parents select teachers. The market model tells us that if schools are known for doing well—in terms of evidence like how teachers do in teacher evaluations, how schools do in test scores—parents are going to select these as the best schools. And, therefore, school choice policies are based on that rational model. But what you really see is that parents typically choose the schools that are close to them. Even though you may think that some private schools may be better, there are other values that influence the decision as to where you send your kid. And parents usually talk to other parents through what I call the parent grapevine, about whether schools are good or not, and which teachers are better than others and the style of the teacher in how they relate to students.

This is a much more powerful force than information people can get out of newspapers or reports. And, actually, parents rarely have access to these reports. Even for our family, knowing so much about schools and about the existence of these reports, we stayed in our community. We used to live in East Lansing, which is a very small place, and even though we had a choice to go, for example, to Okemos which had at the time a newer high school, less than 15 minutes away from the school we selected, we stayed in East Lansing. We went to church with the same people who had their children in the school. So, all of that goes against how the market model expects parents to behave. Families with less resources than ours however have different concerns. They may live in districts where the schools are not as good as the East Lansing schools. In such cases, school choice models don't work either given lack of information about the local schools, and if this information is known, the costs involved in transporting their children to such schools may be prohibitive. I have other examples, too, but maybe I should let David share his.

DAVID

Before that, just riffing on Maria Teresa's example, it's funny because when my wife and I bought our house about 12 years ago, we definitely followed the market model of education—so it was just the opposite. We weren't sure where we were going to live, and we looked at reports on test scores in all these different schools. And that was a huge decider, even while maintaining the commitment to, "We're in this community, and we value the neighbourhood public school." So it's just interesting how different people draw on different pieces of information.

To the question, I thought of two examples. I'll start with one, which relates to norms about who teachers teach in the classroom. So, a lot of household economics is dedicated to: how do you treat the household? People used to think about this unitary model of the household where it's assumed that everyone has the same desires and

For a related exchange on local perceptions of which schools are good and bad, see the interview with interlocutors Masooda Bano and Ying-yi Hong in [Chapter 9](#).

preferences that shape the decisions they made. And now pretty much nobody really believes that unitary model anymore, and there's a huge amount of research on the bargaining and other processes that happen within the household.

I think the economics of education world is still a bit behind, in the sense that we think of the classroom along the lines of, "Okay, the teacher has this practice, and that's the impact in the classroom." While, in fact, there are lots of norms in different communities and countries about which students the teachers cater to within classrooms, right? There's this nice work that Shwetlena Sabarwal and others have done, looking across nine countries about what teachers believe about which students they should be paying attention to. And the vast majority of teachers say—and this is true from Argentina, to Nigeria, to Tajikistan—they say, "We should be focusing our attention on the students who are doing the best." This is a widespread norm; teachers are most likely to call on the students in the front of the class and the highest-performing students. And there are some very natural reasons for that. It's just like how, in my own teaching experience, when you ask a question then it's easiest to call on a student who raises their hand, even though you know that they're probably not the student who needs the most attention.

Every education policy in every ministry probably has text that says something like, "Hey, every student should be learning and, if anything, we should be helping the students who are furthest behind." But in practice, even though there are these policies, this norm is that, "Well, we want to help the students who are doing the best,"— whether that's because teachers think those are the students who are the most likely to go further, or because it's a little bit easier, or for whatever other reason. So this is a norm where we really depart from our stated rules and regulations, and even our aspirations, in favour of something else that's very widely held across many countries.

High-stakes accountability, varied student needs, and pressure on teachers

MARIA TERESA

That's interesting, because I have an example that contradicts that perception a little bit. I did a comparative study of schools in England and in the US, with colleagues in the University of Oxford in the UK during my sabbatical year. I was interviewing teachers who were working in a school in London serving disadvantaged populations, and the school was doing well in terms of all the evaluations and inspections that they have in the English system.

This particular teacher was still in the transition between being a student teacher and a fully qualified teacher. This teacher was teaching mathematics, and she was very concerned about reaching those students that did the worst in her class. But she was

Alderman, H., Chiappori, P. A., Haddad, L., Hoddinott, J., & Kanbur, R. (1995). Unitary versus collective models of the household: is it time to shift the burden of proof? *The World Bank Research Observer*, 10(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/10.1.1>.

Doss, C. (2013). Intra-household bargaining and resource allocation in developing countries. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 28(1), 52-78. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lkt001>.

Sabarwal, S., Abu-Jawdeh, M., & Kapoor, R. (2021). Teacher Beliefs: Why They Matter and What They Are. *The World Bank Research Observer*, lkab008. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lkab008>
For remarks from interlocutor Shwetlena Sabarwal on the aspect of the study that David highlighted, see [Chapter 3](#).

Tatto, M. T., Burn, K., Menter, I., Mutton, T., & Thompson, I. (2019). *Learning to teach in England and the United States: The evolution of policy and practice*. <https://www.routledge.com/Learning-to-Teach-in-England-and-the-United-States-The-Evolution-of-Policy/Tatto-Burn-Menter-Mutton-Thompson/p/book/9780367368647#>.

horribly frustrated, because she couldn't do as much as she wanted for the students, because of the accountability policies and classroom regulations and school-level plans that she faced. And she was probably the best teacher I have seen in terms of how teachers relate to the students. She was explaining certain mathematical concepts that are not very easy. And whenever she could hear one of the students having a doubt, she would immediately stop the class and address it, using that example to explain the concept again. Even though she had an hour and a half for the lesson, she was stressed because she knew that she was not getting to all of the students she wanted to reach—and she was falling behind the usual teaching plan because she was stopping to pay attention to the students. But this person was fantastic. In fact, she had incredibly good knowledge of mathematics, and she was able to understand the challenges that the students were having with certain ideas. And she took the role of a teacher very seriously.

Another interesting thing is that she was also being mentored in the school. Mentoring new teachers is seen as a norm in this school, but it is also universally rare that experienced teachers can actually mentor new teachers in a substantial way, because the mentors are also teaching and they just have very limited time. But the norm in that school was very strong and there was real commitment of time and resources that supported new teachers. It was just a fantastic example of what is possible.

A different example is from when I was videotaping mathematics classroom teachers in the US. This early-career mathematics teacher was preparing her students to take an exam the next day and was doing a review. The class was divided in two tables—in the table to the left of the teacher were students who were struggling with the content, in the table to the right of the teacher were students who answered all the questions and were working at a fast pace as the teacher was trying to develop “fluency”, which is one of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards. She was trying to pay attention to everyone, but she was very rushed because the school norm was for students to complete all these worksheets, the review material, in a very short time period. Unfortunately, the mathematics preparation of this teacher was not as strong as the preparation of the teacher I described earlier—so it was difficult for her to address students' misunderstandings. In fact, in the TEDS-M study, where we studied how teachers learn to teach mathematics across 17 countries, we found important differences in terms of teacher preparation in both the pedagogy of the subject and depth of knowledge in the subject itself. For this teacher, it was difficult to grasp what the students who needed the most help were struggling with, even though she was aware that it was her role. The need to prepare students for the test got in the way of teaching and learning mathematics.

Policies like No Child Left Behind in the US started impacting schools and introducing value-added models for teacher evaluations, which effectively changed important norms regarding the goals and purposes of education and diminished the important role that the teachers have. And now teaching is more “rush, rush, rush”,

The Teacher Education and Development Study in Mathematics, which was conducted in 2007–08 with representative samples of teacher education programmes in Botswana, Canada, Chile, Chinese Taipei, Georgia, Germany, Malaysia, Norway, Oman, Philippines, Poland, Russian Federation, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, and United States. <https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/teds-m>. See also: Tatto, M.T., Rodriguez, M., Smith, W., Reckase, M., & Bankov, K. (Eds.) (2018). *Exploring the Mathematics Education of Teachers using TEDS-M Data*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92144-0>; and Tatto, M. T., Schwille, J., Senk, S. L., Ingvarson, L., Rowley, G., Peck, R., Bankov, K., Rodriguez, M. & Reckase, M. (2012). *Policy, Practice, and Readiness to Teach Primary and Secondary Mathematics in 17 Countries. Findings from the IEA Teacher Education and Development Study in Mathematics (TEDS-M)*. Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Student Achievement. <https://www.iea.nl/publications/study-reports/international-reports-iea-studies/policy-practice-and-readiness-teach>.

For related examples from other contexts of teachers struggling to balance students' needs, pedagogical visions, and exam pressures, see [Chapter 13](#) for interlocutor Juliet Wajega's example from Uganda and [Chapter 6](#) for interlocutor Katlego Sengadi's example from Botswana.

because your school has to get these passing scores. It doesn't work very well, and both teachers and students are very much affected by this.

DAVID

Actually, that relates to a new working paper I just saw, looking at these high-stakes accountability reforms across US states, and showing that the average effect across these studies is a tight zero. They can rule out even very small effects. Obviously, there are a couple of bright spots. There's some evidence that the accountability reforms in DC have had positive impacts, but, by and large, there's no effect. And I think that actually speaks to some of the formation of these norms.

In the example that I gave on teachers believing that the right thing is to give most of the attention to the higher-performing students—and it's definitely not all teachers, right? In this survey, between two-thirds and three-quarters of teachers were reporting this belief, but that's not necessarily a belief that teachers bring with them into the profession out of the ether. Teachers have these pressures on them, related to, "You need to complete the curriculum, and you're going to be judged on a pass rate." So they say, "Well, if I'm going to be judged on my pass rate, then I guess what I have to do is focus on the students who are likely to pass. I mean, I do care about all my students, but I also care about keeping my job."

So one of the dangers of these high-stakes accountability measures is that they can push teachers towards, for example, focusing on the students who have the best chance of passing, and not those students who are so far behind that even if you helped them learn a lot this year, you might not be able to help them pass the test. This might be especially true in countries where you have many students in class who are three, four, or five years behind the expected learning levels for their grade.

MARIA TERESA

There are a number of examples of this, where norm formation comes as a result of outside external accountability measures. In some cases, when the schools knew that there was going to be a test that day, they excused the students who were doing poorly—so that the only students who were tested were those who were doing well, and so the school's scores would look better. This is not something that the education community would approve of at all. But this is an example of a really bad consequence of these kinds of policies.

One related area is the application of value-added models to education. Many people, including Doug Harris, have written about the many validity issues that are involved when evaluating teachers this way. An additional detrimental consequence of this application of the value-added model is how poorly understood are the results of such evaluations which tend to inform faulty policy. For instance, we have seen that teachers who start with high-performing students do better in these evaluations than teachers who start with lower-performing students, even if these teachers have

National Research Council. (1999). *Testing, Teaching, and Learning: A Guide for States and School Districts*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/9609>. See also <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northwest/askarel/accountability-policies.asp>.

Bleiberg, J., Battistin, E., Harbatkin, E., Kraft, M. A., & Springer, M. (2021). The Effect of Teacher Evaluation on Achievement and Attainment: Evidence from Statewide Reforms. EdWorkingPaper, No. 21-496. Annenberg Institute at Brown University. <https://doi.org/10.26300/B1AK-R251>.

Koretz, D. (2017, September 15). End the high-stakes testing sham. U.S. News & World Report. <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/articles/2017-09-15/stop-pretending-that-high-stakes-testing-is-making-schools-better>.

For an example of a critical perspective on value added measures in education see Harris, D.N. (2011). *Value-Added Measures in Education: What Every Educator Needs to Know*. Harvard Education Press, 2011 For an example of a more favourable perspective, see Glazerman, S., Loeb, S., Goldhaber, D., Staiger, D., Raudenbush, S., & Whitehurst, G. (2010). *Evaluating Teachers: The Important Role of Value-Added*. Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/evaluating-teachers-the-important-role-of-value-added/>.

managed to make a significant difference in the academic performance of those students. The teacher that began with low-performing students and has managed to elevate their performance should be rewarded based on the amount of learning accomplished in her class. We wrote about this in a book that came out in 2020 on a study called FIRSTMATH, which is a follow up study of TEDS-M and collected information from early-career teachers across twelve countries. This particular chapter was led by Mark Reckase, who is an MSU distinguished professor who also made important contributions to the TEDS-M study.

Teacher motivation, recruitment, and selection—and the negative consequences of norms erosion

YUE-YI

I just want to flag that we've gotten a whole lot on the table in terms of “*what*” question about the most influential norms that shape teacher practice, whether organisational, professional, social, or whatever. And we're also starting to get into the “*why*” question of why norms emerge, why some are more durable than others. So I don't want to interrupt the flow of this conversation, but if you could also weave in more on the factors and relationships and processes underlying the “*why*”, that would be great.

DAVID

I was actually going to jump in on the “*why*” question, because hearing Maria Teresa talk about these experiences with teachers in the US and other countries made me think of some of the experiences that I've observed in Kenya and elsewhere. And I do think that the “*why*” varies a lot, depending on what the teaching profession looks like in different places. And the profession itself is formed in different ways, right? We talk a lot about places like Finland and Singapore, where it's very hard to get into teaching because it's a very selective profession. So people have to really want it. In the US, you have a different selection model. Teaching is not as prestigious as it should be in the US, and it's not a terribly well-paid profession.

You can see the benefits of a more exclusive model in contrast to countries where you have lots of teachers who are not terribly well-prepared—like in parts of Brazil and Indonesia, where there's a history of teachers and school leaders being selected not on any sort of technical merit, but partly because of political rewards. So you become a teacher because you play the right politics. I remember speaking to a teacher in Kenya once. I said, “Why did you become a teacher?” And you know, most people, no matter why they actually become a teacher, will say something like, “Oh, because I wanted to help children,” or, “because I love teaching!” But this person, in a moment of candour,

See Chapter 7 in Tatto, M. T., Rodriguez, M. C., Reckase, M. D., Smith, W. M., Bankov, K., & Pippin, J. (2020). *The First Five Years of Teaching Mathematics (FIRSTMATH): Concepts, Methods and Strategies for Comparative International Research*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-44047-3_1.

Bruns, B., & Luque, J. (2014). *Great teachers: How to raise student learning in Latin America and the Caribbean*. World Bank Publications. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/20488>.

For related findings school leaders in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America, see Adelman, M., & Lemos, R. (2021). *Managing for learning: Measuring and strengthening education management in Latin America and the Caribbean*. World Bank Publications. For teachers in Indonesia, see Pisani, E. (2014). *Indonesia, etc.: Exploring the improbable nation*. WW Norton & Company. See also remarks from interlocutors Barbara Tournier in Chapter 13 and Shintia Revina's in Chapter 7.

said, “Well, I didn’t get into university.” And so their best option was to go to a teacher training college and become a teacher. It’s not that I think this person was necessarily the worst of teachers—but their motivation was, fundamentally, about teaching being the best job that they could get.

So I do think that the structure of the labour market has a big impact on whether the norms around teaching are focused on, “Hey, let’s do our best to get every child learning,” versus, “This is my job. And it’s the best job that I could get. And I’ll try to discharge my responsibilities because I’m getting paid to do so.” Unfortunately, we know that those responsibilities don’t always get discharged. I do think that there are a lot of good teachers even in countries where you don’t have good preparation for the profession—but still the structure and preparation does change the evolution of norms within the field.

MARIA TERESA

It’s interesting that you talked about that. In the TEDS-M study, we did ask 15,163 future primary teachers and 9,389 future secondary teachers in the 17 participating countries about why they wanted to become a teacher. And the options included “I am attracted by teacher salaries”, which was the least chosen option. In general, they were not going into teaching because of the money. The most frequently chosen options were that they liked working with young people for the primary teachers, and the love of mathematics for the secondary teachers. In addition, many felt that they had “a talent for teaching” and considered teaching as a “challenging job,” and wanting to “have an influence on the next generation.” These reasons reflect norms and expectations and should be of interest to those wanting to recruit and retain teachers in the profession.

But I wanted to talk a little bit about how these high-stakes accountability measures and the market model in education have affected norms that were very valuable in schools—like respect for teachers, or trust. There is this book that Barbara Schneider and Tony Bryk wrote, *Trust in schools*, where they say that the work of the schools and teachers depends on relationships. David Cohen also wrote about this. So when those relationships get altered, when these accountability measures make teachers compete with each other, some are now “better” than others and some get more money than others. Teachers may stop sharing resources and strategies that work for them, because they want to be better than all of the others. And the idea that some teachers don’t do as well as other teachers also erodes the trust of the community, between families and parents and teachers. So those norms that nurtured trust among teachers and that were so very valuable in sustaining a collaborative and productive work environment have been dramatically altered in the US since No Child Left Behind, in England since the 1980s when Margaret Thatcher introduced the market model in education.

Qualitative research elsewhere in Africa tells a similar story: that teaching is often the last resort for candidates. For Malawi, see Morley, A. (2021). “Life, it doesn’t end here”: Aspirations and the maintenance of hope among primary teachers in Malawi. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 107, 103486. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103486>. For Ghana, see Akyeampong, K., & Stephens, D. (2000). “On the Threshold”: The Identity of Student Teachers in Ghana. Centre for International Education, University of Sussex. <https://www.gov.uk/research-for-development-outputs/discussion-paper-4-on-the-threshold-the-identity-of-student-teachers-in-ghana>.

See Section 4.4.8 (pp. 125–126) in Tatto, M. T., Peck, R., Schulle, J., Bankov, K., Senk, S. L., Rodriguez, M., Ingvarson, L., Reckase, M., Rowley, G. (2012). *Policy, practice, and readiness to teach primary and secondary mathematics in 17 countries: Findings from the IEA teacher education and development study in mathematics (TEDS-M)*. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). <https://www.iea.nl/index.php/publications/study-reports/international-reports-iea-studies/policy-practice-and-readiness-teach>.

Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. Russell Sage Foundation. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15670/>.

Cohen, D. K. (2011). *Teaching and Its Predicaments*. Harvard University Press.

And you can see the contrast in, for example, Sri Lanka, where I did some research, and where teachers are so respected and venerated, and in other countries that have not adopted the market model such as in Finland as per Pasi Sahlberg's account.

In contexts where these norms that support trust have been eroded, we see serious consequences for the education system. We're seeing this in Arizona, where one quarter of schools are without teachers, and more generally, in the US and in other parts of the world. We have an incredible teacher shortage which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. When a person's motivations for becoming a teacher are not fulfilled by the schools and the current systems, there will be little interest in the profession. Another norm that has been eroded by this competitive accountability climate is the norm of promoting more access and equity in schools as a main concern of educators; we are thus failing to reach the students who need the most help, such as children of disadvantaged communities including immigrants. And for these communities, when they get a good education, some of them will eventually become teachers—that historically has been one avenue for breaking into the labour market, right? So the fact that we are not providing equitable access to a high quality education for these communities is also playing into this incredible lack of teachers in our schools.

And I agree with David about the lack of a strong selection model for teacher preparation in the US, which often results at least for future primary teachers in a weak background in content knowledge as we saw in the TEDS-M study. This doesn't happen in Finland, it doesn't happen in Singapore, it doesn't happen in Taiwan or in Sri Lanka either. So in these countries, the people who enter teacher education programmes are really well-prepared to go into teaching as per the criteria for admission into these programmes, which require demonstrating a deep knowledge of the content as shown in the TEDS-M study. And sometimes they also give incentives for those who get into teaching, like, for example, "We will pay for the costs of your studies, but you have to teach in this disadvantaged school for five years." Which is a policy that has been used in many places, including in China.

Prospects and challenges for shifting educational equilibria through in-service and pre-service teacher training

DAVID

It's funny, on that point about staying in the school for five years, the other day I was just reading a study from Ghana where they interviewed a bunch of teachers in rural schools who had been hired under a programme like that: they hired teachers from the local area, with a contract that they had to stay in the schools for three to five years.

Tatto, M. T., & Dharmadasa, K. H. (1995). Social and Political Contexts of Policy Formation in Teacher Education in Sri Lanka. In B. Lindsay & M. B. Ginsburg (Eds.), *The Political Dimension In Teacher Education*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315043135>.

Sahlberg, P. (2012). *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* Teachers' College Press. See also this open-access monograph: Simola, H., Kauko, J., Varjo, J., Kalalahti, M., & Sahlström, F. (2017). *Dynamics in Education Politics: Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203068793>.

See Chapter 5 (pp. 129-152) in Tatto, M. T., Peck, R., Schwille, J., Bankov, K., Senk, S. L., Rodriguez, M., Ingvarson, L., Reckase, M., Rowley, G. (2012). *Policy, practice, and readiness to teach primary and secondary mathematics in 17 countries: Findings from the IEA teacher education and development study in mathematics (TEDS-M)*. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). <https://www.iea.nl/index.php/publications/study-reports/international-reports-iea-studies/policy-practice-and-readiness-teach>.

On incentives to enter teaching, see, for example, Youngs, P., Qian, H., Hu, S., & Prawat, X. J. (2017). China's Free Teacher Education Policy. In M. Akiba & G. K. LeTendre (Eds.), *International Handbook of Teacher Quality and Policy* (pp. 463-477). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315710068-30>.

And in all these interviews, the teachers basically say something like, “This is my ticket out of here. So as soon as my five years are up, I’m headed to the city.”

About the different norms in different countries that Maria Teresa talked about, I do think that countries or education systems can land in different equilibria. So one of the challenges is that we often think about is: how can we shift the equilibria? Think about a system like Finland. If you read Pasi Sahlberg’s book *Finnish Lessons*, which Maria Teresa mentioned just now, then you realise that their equilibrium was arrived at over something like 40 years, right? This is not a case of, “We changed this one policy, and that really did it.” There’s a different sort of equilibrium when high-stakes accountability reforms have, I would agree, eroded the trust, prestige, and professionalism of teaching.

This is similar to something that I often see in a lot of the work that I’ve done on teacher professional development, and how we can help teachers who are already in the classroom, where you have a lot of teachers who arrive in the classroom who aren’t very well prepared. But in a lot of places in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, there’s an added challenge because you don’t have a big, thick labour market. Now, here in Washington DC, they fired a bunch of poorly performing teachers—and then they hired a bunch of new teachers from Northern Virginia and Maryland. So you’ve got this thick market here. You can discuss whether firing and hiring like that is a good policy, but that’s a separate question. The point is that in northern Nigeria, when they fire a bunch of unprepared teachers, it’s not like there are a whole bunch of well-prepared people who are so excited to move to northern Nigeria and deliver lessons, so you really have to work with the teachers who are already in the classroom.

And when you look at large-scale teacher professional development, in most countries it looks terrible. That’s because there’s an equilibrium of, “What does teacher professional development look like? Well, we all go to some big ballroom or some centre, and we sit in that room for a day or two, and we collect a per diem, which is appropriate, because we had to travel to get there. And maybe we even hear some things that are useful.” But, as any teacher knows, that is not how you actually teach someone in a way that’s going to change what they do. No teacher would say, “That’s the right way to teach.” But yet we get in this equilibrium because it’s low-cost compared to the kinds of coaching models that we know make a difference. It’s also relatively lower effort, right? Somebody comes into a room and gives a PowerPoint—it doesn’t cost either the trainers or the teachers very much in terms of effort.

But when we look at the programmes that actually work, it’s teacher professional development that involves lots of practice. It’s teacher professional development that follows teachers back into the classroom and gives them some coaching to help them implement the things that they’ve learned. And so it costs more in terms of both money and effort—and there has to be an equilibrium shift to get there. You can be in the equilibrium of, “This is what teacher professional development just looks like; this is what we’ve always done.” And there’s a question of whether countries are willing to say, “Actually, we know what it looks like to effectively upgrade teacher skills, and

Cobbold, C. (2006). Attracting and retaining rural teachers in Ghana: The premise and promise of a district sponsorship scheme. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 32(4), 453–469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607470600982142>

For a related systematic review co-authored by David, see Evans, D. K., & Acosta, A. M. (2021). *How to Recruit Teachers for Hard-to-Staff Schools: A Systematic Review of Evidence from Low- And Middle-Income Countries* (No. 595; CGD Working Paper). Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/how-recruit-teachers-hard-staff-schools-systematic-review-evidence-low-and-middle-income>.

On Washington DC, see Adnot, M., Dee, T., Katz, V., & Wyckoff, J. (2017). Teacher turnover, teacher quality, and student achievement in DCPS. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(1), 54–76.

On Nigeria, see both BBC News. (2017, October 10). Nigeria schools: Kaduna primary teachers fail pupils’ exam. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-41576869>; and Lere, M. (2017, November 6). Kaduna provides ‘remedy’ for 22,000 teachers who failed primary four exam. *Premium Times*. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/nwest/248463-kaduna-provides-remedy-22000-teachers-failed-primary-four-exam.html>.

On coaching, see Cilliers, J., Fleisch, B., Prinsloo, C., & Taylor, S. (2020). How to improve teaching practice? An experimental comparison of centralized training and in-classroom coaching. *Journal of Human Resources*, 55(3), 926–962.

Popova, A., Evans, D. K., Breeding, M. E., & Arancibia, V. (2021). Teacher Professional Development around the World: The Gap between Evidence and Practice. *The World Bank Research Observer*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lkab006>.

it doesn't look anything like what we've done in the past," and then to really invest in shifting that equilibrium.

MARIA TERESA

That's really interesting. And I think we're now getting into the "how" question, right?

YUE-YI

Yes, we are—the question of how to reorient teacher professional norms systemwide.

MARIA TERESA

One of the points I wanted to make is about in-service teacher preparation. Sometimes when you have teachers who didn't get a good preparation in preservice teacher education, then people will say, "Oh, we can solve their lack of preparation with some in-services workshops." And I agree that in-services are really poorly run, in some places. But that's why my emphasis is on the pre-service preparation of teachers, because once you are in the classroom, you're already with kids, and you're already helping them a lot or doing a lot of damage. So I think investment in pre-service teacher education is really, really important. And in some cases, the norms that we have built in teacher education really need to be revised—for example, norms about how much subject-matter knowledge you need to acquire before we say that you are ready to teach, how well we mentor the teachers so that they can really learn how to teach a diverse range of kids. All of that needs to be emphasised in pre-service teacher education. And the TEDS-M study actually showed that some countries do very well in these areas, and some countries do very poorly.

So it's not only about the norms in schools, but also the norms in teacher education programmes. But challenging those norms is really hard, and the policies that have been implemented have not helped. Under No Child Left Behind—which has now been superseded by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) under President Obama—George W. Bush decided that a qualified teacher needed to have enough content knowledge and assumed that a bachelor's degree credential was a good indicator of that knowledge. But what about the pedagogical content knowledge? What about the pedagogy? What about spending time in schools under expert mentorship? So that's one set of emphases where I think we need to consider in the norms about what we think defines a high-quality teacher in teacher education programmes.

The other thing is also about the norms of in-service preparation. I have done a lot of work on what I call coherence in teacher education programmes and in-service programmes. And what we have right now is a very incoherent system—not in all places, but in many places—where there is no connection between what teachers learn in pre-service teacher education and what they learn in-service preparation. It should

See Chapters 4 to 8 in Tatto, M. T., Peck, R., Schwille, J., Bankov, K., Senk, S. L., Rodriguez, M., Ingvarson, L., Reckase, M. Rowley, G. (2012). *Policy, practice, and readiness to teach primary and secondary mathematics in 17 countries: Findings from the IEA teacher education and development study in mathematics (TEDS-M)*. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). <https://www.iea.nl/index.php/publications/study-reports/international-reports-iea-studies/policy-practice-and-readiness-teach>.

Papanastasiou, E. C., Tatto, M. T., & Neophytou, L. (2012). Programme theory, programme documents and state standards in evaluating teacher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 37(3), 305–320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2010.534760>.

be complementary, but it's not. Sometimes the in-services focus on something that all the teachers already know, or it's very vague or very badly planned. So there isn't a good universal or even local system where pre-service and in-service preparation are coherent. Related to the earlier point about trust, we have also lost trust in teacher education programmes, with the introduction of alternative routes that do not actually prepare teachers better. So the same kinds of policies that have been eroding this relational trust in schools have been also eroding relational trust in the quality of teacher education programmes and in-service programmes.

YUE-YI

On this point about setting norms early in teachers' careers, one study I really enjoyed last year was a paper by Michael Hobbiss, Sam Sims, and Rebecca Allen, where they link neuroscientific principles with survey data to address the question of why teachers often improve their practice a lot in their novice years, but then reach a sort of plateau. And part of their answer to that is that the neuroscience of habit formation is different from the neuroscience of changing existing habits, which is partly why in-service training that gives you information as if there aren't pre-existing pedagogical habits at play just doesn't shift the needle, compared to things like long-term coaching.

Dave, any thoughts on the "how" question about approaches for reorienting norms?

MARIA TERESA

Can I just jump in before I forget, and then I won't interrupt you, David. On a positive note, there are very good models of in-service teacher education. For example, Jennifer Gore has been doing really good work in Australia based on in-school collaboration and lesson study. Anyway, thank you, David for your patience.

DAVID

No, that's great. Please interrupt me at length and often! One thing I will just say on Yue-Yi's point about that study, I had an interesting experience when I was in El Salvador. I was visiting schools, and we had an expert from a Singaporean teacher training college. And he shared something in that context that really struck me, and that relates to this complementarity between pre-service and in-service. I've heard people say, "Well, since in-service is so bad, we really have to focus on the pre-service." And obviously, the pre-service is important. But there's the issue that if you reform pre-service, then you'll have a great young teacher who has all of these good ideas about teaching—and then this young teacher will arrive in a school where the norms are to do things a different way. Who's going to win that battle? It's not going to be this new teacher.

Hobbiss, M., Sims, S., & Allen, R. (2021). Habit formation limits growth in teacher effectiveness: A review of converging evidence from neuroscience and social science. *Review of Education*, 9(1), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3226>. See also Chapter 14 for an interview with Mike Hobbiss and fellow interlocutor Alice Cornish.

For a brief overview of Jennifer Gore's work on quality teaching rounds in teacher professional development, see <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/profile/jenny-gore> or <https://qtacademy.edu.au/what-is-qtr/>.

And so that's why changing the professional norms among those who are already within the school—even if it's harder—just has to be part of the solution. I don't believe there's any way to get there just by changing the next generation, because that will get lost when they enter the classroom.

MARIA TERESA

You know, with the new teacher, in the short term, yes, maybe the school wins. But not in the long term.

DAVID

I think it just depends. But I do think that there's no way to get around trying to help change teachers who are in service.

MARIA TERESA

I'd agree with that.

For a related observation on the need to improve not only preservice but also in-service training, see interlocutor Luis Crouch's remarks in [Chapter 12](#).

Iterative improvement in systemwide education policy and in school-level professional development

DAVID

I was also thinking about how this sort of cultural change happens. And last year, I spent some time studying education turnaround stories in northern Brazil, both in the municipality of Sobral and in the state of Ceará. These are both places where in a relatively short time period, over the course of a little more than a decade, they've seen dramatic increases in quality. And if you look at what happened there—you know, Maria Teresa talked about No Child Left Behind in the US and these sorts of accountability changes that come from outside the profession. In contrast to that, one of the things that happened in northern Brazil is that the political leadership wasn't just around things like, "Okay, we're going to set some accountability standards," and then neglecting the rest of it. Instead, it was political leadership that was consistent over time, iteratively trying to figure out what's going to work.

Evans, D. K., & Loureiro, A. (2020). *Getting Education Right: State and Municipal Success in Reform for Universal Literacy in Brazil*. World Bank.

In Sobral, for example, they initially changed the selection criteria for school leaders and teachers in the late 1990s. They made the criteria less political and more technical. I think that was a necessary condition, but several years after the learning outcomes still hadn't changed at all. And that's exactly the kind of thing where someone might say, "Okay, we're going to do this high-stakes accountability reform," and then you implement that reform, and that's it. But instead, they said, "Okay, we need to reorient

the entire education system around learning, with a lot of focus on cooperative work within schools and on school leadership.” I visited a school—and this was not an exceptional school—where the principal sits down with the teachers every week, and they set goals, and they see how things are going. And principals have the skills so that they can be pedagogical leaders. They can weigh in and actually give teachers advice. They’re not just bean counters.

It’s a systemwide shift. You have political leadership, which is consistent over time, and then you also have principals and teachers who are all working together. And then you publicise successes, because I think an important element is that a lot of people, like Maria Teresa mentioned, have lost faith in education systems. They’re like, “Oh, those teachers aren’t very good.” And I think it’s essential to remind people that when school systems do have successes, then we need to publicise those. We need to take pride in those so that there’s this iterative experience, and then the community also recognises that, “You know, these teachers are doing good, hard work. And this is a worthwhile profession that people should want to be in.”

In Chile, there was this programme called *Elige Educar*, which means Choose Teaching, that tried to use different sorts of publicity to attract students to the profession. There wasn’t a really tight impact evaluation, but there’s some evidence that suggests that it was effective. But it has to be this iterative process where the education profession is improving, and you’re calling attention to those improvements. So you draw both better trust and more support, as well as more motivated candidates into the profession.

MARIA TERESA

Actually, the example of in-service teacher development in Australia that I mentioned earlier relates to this kind of iterative process with improvement, trust, and support at the school level. I attended one of the workshops that Jennifer Gore does with teachers. The teachers in the school all have to come together and they have to be willing to contribute. Each teacher is recorded in a lesson—they can choose what they want to teach, depending on what challenges they might be having—and then they do a series of conversations to provide productive feedback on the lesson. And then it goes around to all of the other teachers in the group. It’s like a combination of lesson study and a commitment-based intervention in the school that can change the norms of “how we do things here”. Overall, this model has been very, very successful. She has done randomised control trials that can show the enormous success of this in-service approach, not only on lesson quality and the trusting relationships within the school, but also on how the students benefit.

This is just a very good example of the kinds of things that educators need to do to help the professional community to challenge these forces that are destroying, in many cases, these valuable school norms.

On *Elige Educar*, see Bassi, M., & Covacevich, C. (2012). *How Can We Bring the Best Talent to the Classroom? Preliminary Results of Elige Educar*. Inter-American Development Bank. <https://publications.iadb.org/publications/english/document/Briefly-Noted-No-19-July-2012-How-Can-We-Bring-the-Best-Talent-to-the-Classroom-Preliminary-Results-of-Elige-Educar.pdf> For an interview with interlocutor Verónica Cabezas, president of the board of *Elige Educar*, see [Chapter 2](#).

For an introduction to the Japanese teacher professional development approach known as lesson study, see Lewis, C., Perry, R., & Murata, A. (2006). How Should Research Contribute to Instructional Improvement? The Case of Lesson Study. *Educational Researcher*, 35(3), 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X035003003> (open-access version: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242574847>).

Gore, J., Lloyd, A., Smith, M., Bowe, J., Ellis, H., & Lubans, D. (2017). Effects of professional development on the quality of teaching: Results from a randomised controlled trial of Quality Teaching Rounds. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 68, 99–113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.08.007>; Gore, J. M., Miller, A., Fray, L., Harris, J., & Prieto, E. (2021). Improving student achievement through professional development: Results from a randomised controlled trial of Quality Teaching Rounds. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 101, 103297. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103297>.

Balancing accountability and professionalism; pursuing multifaceted, multistakeholder change

DAVID

A complement to that example is this work that I've just seen come out of Côte d'Ivoire, by Sharon Wolf and Guilherme Lichand, where in some schools they nudged teachers directly with encouraging messages, and in some other schools they got parents more involved in teachers' work. In a third group of schools, they did both. What they found was that students dropped out less in either of the models with parents more involved in teachers' work or with teachers nudged directly, but when they did both then teachers actually did worse. And it looks like this is because teachers need autonomy and professionalism, as well as accountability. Standards and accountability obviously matter, but by themselves they make teachers become labourers instead of professionals. And that is not how you deliver good education. So having some support for teachers and dynamic interaction with other stakeholders is really crucial that in this Côte d'Ivoire context—but having too many people trying to manage and give feedback and hold teachers accountable actually made them perform worse.

I think that finding that balance between standards and accountability, on the one hand, and support and professionalisation, on the other, is the *only* way to go. It might not be the only way to get 0.3 standard deviations higher in some randomised trial, but it is the only way to shift the equilibrium and get to a better education system.

MARIA TERESA

Yes, I like the idea of the balance between accountability and professionalism. I recently wrote an article that was published in the *European Journal of Teacher Education* where I discuss the importance for the profession to develop its own accountability processes just like in other professions: standards and accountability must be developed by the profession for the profession. That is the element we have been losing, and that needs to be regained. Because otherwise, the profession is not acting as a profession. I have written a lot about that.

Now, I also recognise that much has been accomplished in education, but much more is needed. It's just that, looking at the low level of resources that teachers have and the results of the studies that we have done, you know, I am alarmed by the rate at which people are opting out of teaching, by the lack of trust in schools and in teacher education programmes, and by the lack of trust in education in general to support any valuable change or to support a democracy. Which, to me, seems like a really, really important thing to talk about.

Lichand, G., & Wolf, S. (2021). Arm-Wrestling in the Classroom: The Non-Monotonic Effects of Monitoring Teachers. University of Zurich Department of Economics Working Paper No. 357. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3662146>.

Tatto, M.T. (2021). Professionalism in teaching and teacher education. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 44 (1), 20-44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1849130>.

See, for example, Tatto, M. T. (2006). Education reform and the global regulation of teachers' education, development and work: A cross-cultural analysis. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 45(4-5), 231-241. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2007.02.003>.

Concerning systemic change and norm formation I think we need to consider the important work of global actors. I was recently in a committee for the OECD, where I am proposing to think differently about in-service professional development and learning to teach in general; this would lead to asking substantial questions about the continuum of teacher learning in TALIS, the Teaching and Learning International Survey. I think that programmes like these OECD and IEA studies do help to set norms. So we really need to pay attention to these studies and search for the kinds of norms that they are promoting. What are the goals for education that these initiatives reflect? I also wrote an article on the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals where I point out that teacher education programmes are not considered at the par with, for instance, higher education, and that teachers and teacher learning is only considered as an implementation goal, not a learning goal. Global actors are really important—and can significantly support much-needed norms in education and in that way help the profession.

YUE-YI

I would completely agree with that. Dave, a last thought from you.

DAVID

I want to mention one of the big challenges as we think about trying to shift norms in contexts where teachers are not well-prepared and they're not performing very well. And the challenge is that we have to remember that the teachers are not fundamentally heroes or villains. Of course, some teachers are heroes, and some teachers are villains. We have exceptional teachers who work against incredible odds. But then I've recently been doing work on sexual assault by teachers against students—those are villains, if there ever were any; and it's not common, but it's particularly terrible because teachers are in a position of trust. But in general, rather than thinking of teachers as heroes or villains, we should just think of them as regular people who respond to the norms and the incentives that are around them.

So if we want to change things over time—not just for some short-run quick fix—it means reshaping the systems that are around these people, drawing in good, motivated people, giving them the support they need to succeed, and then also holding them accountable for delivering in response to that support. It's all of these pieces together. Any intervention that does just one of these is likely going to be short-sighted.

YUE-YI

I entirely agree with that as well.

Tatto, M.T. (2021). Opportunities to Learn General Pedagogical Knowledge along the Teaching Career. In H. Ulferts (Ed.) *Teaching as a Knowledge Profession: Studying Pedagogical Knowledge Across Education Systems*. Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e823ef6e-en>.

Tatto, M.T. (2021). Comparative Research on teachers and teacher education: Global perspectives to inform UNESCO'S SDG 4 Agenda. *Oxford Review of Education*, 47 (1), 25-44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1842183>.

Evans, D.K., Hares, S., Holland, P., & Acosta, A.M. (2021). Adolescent Girls' Safety In and Out of School: Evidence on Physical and Sexual Violence from across Sub-Saharan Africa. CGD Working Paper 597. Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/adolescent-girls-safety-and-out-school-evidence-physical-and-sexual-violence-across-sub>.

DAVID

My 2022 reading list is just going to be books that Maria Teresa shared. That's it. That's all I'm reading in 2022.

MARIA TERESA

There are many of them!

DAVID

It's more than I can read in a year.

MARIA TERESA

This has been fun. I'm so glad to be here with both of you.

CHAPTER 12

On socialisation, standards, support, and changes in the status and scale of the teaching profession

Kwame Akyeampong & Luis Crouch

Kwame Akyeampong is Professor of International Education and Development at the Open University, UK. Kwame began his academic career in Ghana at the University of Cape Coast in 1989 and served as the Director of the Institute of Education from 2002–2004. He has particular interest in the political economy of education systems in low-income countries. His research aims to offer alternative viewpoints on educational policy and practice based on critical perspectives and experiences of policymakers, school leaders, teachers, and students in African education environments. He is an Honorary Professor the University of Sussex and co-chairs the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel (GEEAP).



Luis Crouch is Senior Economist at RTI's International Development Group and a member of the RISE Research Directorate. He specialises in education policy, decentralised finance, political economy of reform, education statistics, planning, and projections. He has experience in all key areas of education data analysis, from the generation of primary data via surveys and citizen input, to statistical and econometric analysis, to evidence-based, Cabinet-level policy dialogue. Luis previously worked at the World Bank and at the Global Partnership for Education. He has worked closely on South Africa's education sector funding reforms, Egypt's decentralisation experiments, and decentralisation and other policy reforms in Peru and Indonesia.



Due to scheduling constraints, this interview was conducted separately with each interlocutor, first with Kwame on 17 December 2021, then with Luis responding to a recording of Kwame's contributions on 3 January 2022. As with all the interviews in this project, interlocutors had the opportunity to asynchronously revise their transcribed contributions.

YUE-YI

Let's dive in. Could you tell me about a story, experience, or incident that illustrates how norms among teachers can affect teacher behaviour or teacher practice or outcomes in ways that might not have been anticipated by the official rules, or by an economic model, or by other preconceived expectations?

KWAME

One experience that I can think of is from looking back at my own engagement with some teachers and the expectations that the profession places on them, as laid out in the code of practice. The code of practice frames the expectations that teachers are supposed to meet, and often this focuses on expected teacher behaviours—how should teachers conduct themselves within the school environment, how should they relate to other teachers, and the professional values that are expected to uphold.

In my experience of engaging with teachers, particularly in the Sub-Saharan African context, this code of practice often is what defines their identity as teachers. And, in many cases, it has very little to say about improving learning outcomes for all their students.

YUE-YI

Could you give an example of some of the things the code of practice talks about instead?

KWAME

Well, if I think about some examples in the Ghanaian context, there would be expectations about their moral behaviour, about disciplinary actions, about attendance—for example, they are expected to attend school regularly themselves and keep a register of students' attendance. All these things are part of the code of practice, and that is what shapes their identity as teachers. And that's what the public expects of them as members of their profession.

YUE-YI

That rings true with my brief experience as a teacher in Malaysia. There was often a lot of attention to things like "Are teachers following the dress code?" and to administrative documentation and exam pass rates, but less so to a purpose-driven sense of, "What are we truly achieving in helping our children to develop?"

KWAME

But we mustn't forget that this emphasis on expected behaviour is also because the teacher is seen as a role model. My experience is that a lot of the research and our thinking about teachers doesn't take this aspect of their lives very seriously. And to me, this is where we have missed the opportunity to see how we can make teachers much more effective in schools.

So, for me it goes back to how they become teachers and what they are socialised into as far as professional expectations. When you become a teacher, what are the experiences that shape your identity as a teacher? The code of practice says very little about learning. It is almost assumed that trained teachers are all capable of promoting learning for every student. It's expected that teachers will teach, and children will learn. The code of practice is much more about professional ethics and professional behaviour and not much about the main job of the teacher which is to ensure every child is learning.

YUE-YI

Luis, would you like to respond to any of that? And can you also share a story or example of your own, where something about norms among teachers just bucked expectations?

LUIS

Sure. When I do work on education systems, I like to visit schools. And when I visit schools, I like to see whether the kids are reading. One experience that I had was visiting a school in a rural area in a very poor country—it might have been in Uganda, or maybe in Mali. And I normally ask the teacher, "Can I see how well the best reader reads? And then how a student that's not reading very well reads?" In this case, the teacher said, "Yeah, I'll get my best reader. He reads so well that he doesn't even need the book to read." And, sure enough, they brought the student forward, and the student just repeated a passage that he had memorised.

So that highlights how fundamental norms can be, even unwritten norms—in the sense that here's a teacher who didn't even know what reading really is. That's an extreme case. But I think it symbolises the dilemma that one faces in that the education systems in many of these countries expanded so quickly, and without maintaining standards, such that the teachers were not necessarily the most educated people in those societies. And it raises the dilemma of how you can build norms and bureaucratic standards that can account for the fact that some people in the system don't even understand the most fundamental issues that you're talking about. How do you anticipate the fact that you might have some people that are teaching reading that literally do not know what reading is? So that, to me was a real wake-up call. It symbolises many of the issues, though I admit it's extreme.

For a related observation, see [Chapter 9](#) for interlocutor Masooda Bano's remarks on the need to harness not only financial but also religious, sociocultural, and altruistic motivations.

See also Barrett, A. M. (2005). Teacher accountability in context: Tanzanian primary school teachers' perceptions of local community and education administration. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 35(1), 43–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057920500033530>.

YUE-YI

It may be extreme, but it's such a striking illustration. And I think it dovetails a little bit with Kwame's example in that a surface appearance—whether recitation instead of reading, or behaviour instead of teaching—has taken the place of the core of the profession.

How prior socialisation and prevailing accountability practices can detract from pedagogical practice and educational commitments

KWAME

One aspect that I get very frustrated about when I look at the research about how we make teachers more effective is that it is almost assumed that these teachers come to the profession with nothing, as though the period before their training and their training itself has not socialised them into certain professional expectations. And that all one has to do is give them some further training about how to teach effectively, and then they'll go ahead and do it. That's a big mistake. We have to remember that teachers in any country go through the education system themselves and therefore come with expectations from their encounter with teachers. It's the only profession where you actually experience beforehand what teachers do before you become one. So, they come in with strong notions of what teaching is, and then they are socialised into teaching, which often reinforces those notions.

Often researchers or reformers come to teachers thinking that, "Okay, they are not effective, so we need to introduce interventions so that they will do A, B, C, D." But these interventions are not strong enough to really shift this hardwired professional culture, this identity which places emphasis on teaching behaviours as a result of their training and professional expectations.

YUE-YI

We're already covering, very broadly, all three aspects of this teacher norms project—the "what", "why", and "how"—but just to make sure we get good coverage, let's focus on "what" for a little bit. So besides what's already been mentioned, what are some of the most influential norms that shape teacher practice in the contexts that you've worked in?

For a classic account of teachers' early socialisation into professional expectations, see the discussion of teachers' "apprenticeship of observation" throughout their own schooldays in Lortie, D. C. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. University of Chicago Press.

For a similar observation on adults' educational expectations being formed during childhood schooling experiences, see interlocutor Melanie Ehren's remarks in [Chapter 10](#).

KWAME

I think the system of accountability is another norm that is quite influential in how teachers behave and what they do. So, for example, in many systems, when circuit supervisors or school-level supervisors work with teachers, the teachers are expected to produce lesson plans according to certain standards and expectations. They're expected to demonstrate the commitment to marking students' work and to assessing students. These expectations have become the norms that are used to hold them accountable as far as their professional practice is concerned. So, the system of supervision—how teachers are held accountable, what they're accountable for, who they're accountable to—is quite important as far as professional norms are concerned.

YUE-YI

Thank you, Kwame. Any other thoughts on the range of norms, Luis?

LUIS

I want to echo and expand on what Kwame said around the issue of norms of accountability. But I don't mean norms in the sense of a written bureaucratic code, but rather norms in the deeper sociological sense of expected behaviours. The implicit behaviour in most successful education systems is that the accountability is mutual. In other words, the teacher may indeed be held accountable for getting the kids to learn, but the system also has to be accountable for supporting the teachers in getting the kids to learn.

In a lot of the projects I've worked on that have tried to improve teacher performance, and particularly if the project has succeeded such that the kids are now learning more, I've typically asked the teachers, "What do you think has changed that's helping you teach better now?" And the almost universal refrain among the teachers is, "Well, when we previously got trained, we were never actually taught how to teach. We were taught philosophy and we were taught sociology, but the actual professional skills of teaching were not taught to us in the teacher training colleges. And the in-service training and the school inspection system also don't provide us with tips or support on how you actually teach better. The inspection is highly ritualistic. It's about filling out forms; it's not about the substance of teaching and learning." Again, there's a lack of mutual accountability.

This also relates to the point Kwame made earlier about how teachers are socialised into certain expectations. And sometimes when education systems expand very quickly, as I mentioned before, they often do so without a profound sense of commitment to actual education—so that it becomes almost like a game of pursuing 100 percent enrolment and quantitative expansion of the system. And as Lant Pritchett says, you get systems that are doing things via what he calls isomorphic mimicry, where you copy the trappings and the superficial aspects of what a good system does, but

For more on different types of norms, see interlocutor Margarita Gómez's remarks in [Chapter 5](#).

On isomorphic mimicry, see Pritchett, L. (2014). The risks to education systems from design mismatch and global isomorphism: Concepts, with examples from India. UNU-WIDER Working Paper. <https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2014/760-8>; and Pritchett, L. (2018). The Politics of Learning: Directions for Future Research. RISE Working Paper Series. 18/020. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2018/020.

it's not done with true serious intent. So as the teachers are trained and socialised into the system, they get the sense that the whole enterprise is not really all that serious.

During the struggle against Soviet-style communism in Poland in the 1980s, one of the leading groups that opposed communism was the Solidarity Trade Union. And they used to have a famous saying, where the workers said, "The government pretends to pay us, and we pretend to work." And it was almost like: this is a game; nobody takes this seriously, and so why should we?

Similarly, I think there is something to these unwritten norms in many expanding education systems that have devalued education as a serious enterprise. Because the commitment to it isn't really there. It's a surface commitment; it's a quantitative commitment, not a deeply felt commitment that can underpin a true social contract. If the ministry doesn't take education seriously, why should the teachers? So there's a breakdown of not just accountability of the teachers to the ministry, but of the ministry to the teachers. This lack of seriousness, of mutual accountability, is a very important norm that the teachers begin to absorb. And it's very difficult to change that norm by just putting a commitment in writing. It's something that has to be absorbed deeply and taken seriously. It's not just a matter of what it says in a bureaucratic circular or a memo.

For more on such a sense of commitment and how it needs to be maintained long-term for meaningful systemwide change, see interlocutor Michael Woolcock's remarks in [Chapter 10](#).

Problems emerging from regimented and theoretical pre-service teacher education

YUE-YI

This is getting us into the "why" question, so let's shift our focus there. Why do these norms emerge? And why do some norms stay durable, where some would-be norms just fade away? Kwame, you've talked a bit about socialisation from their own school-going experiences and through teacher education, but what other relationships and factors drive the emergence of teacher norms?

KWAME

I think these norms have their roots in policies that were enacted to shape the profession and that have gradually stabilised into what is expected of teachers generally—and often this is communicated through the teacher education system. Some of my own work is focused on this area. For example, in many systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, people often enter the teaching profession immediately after post-secondary education, and this post-secondary teacher education is very much modelled on secondary education—that is, the experience of teaching and learning in secondary education. So, if you go into a teacher education college in Ghana, for example, it's a boarding-school-style system, where teachers have to wake up at a certain time, they have to sweep the compound, they have to wear a uniform. All of

See, for example, Akyeampong, K., Lussier, K., Pryor, J., & Westbrook, J. (2013). Improving teaching and learning of basic maths and reading in Africa: Does teacher preparation count? *International Journal of Educational Development*, 33(3), 272–282. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2012.09.006>.

this communicates certain values about the profession and shapes how they become teachers. Becoming a teacher becomes very regimented.

It's not easy to change this. And if you want teachers to be autonomous, to be creative, and yet you give them a training that stifles creativity and autonomy, then you're not going to get them to become creative in the classroom.

YUE-YI

That makes a lot of sense. I'd be curious to hear you speak a bit about how norms might change over time. I know you have a chapter about changes in Ghana's teacher education over the years. Have there been any visible changes in the norms affecting different cohorts of teachers through different phases of policy changes and teacher education emphases?

KWAME

Yes, and to give a very current example, we have had the introduction of teacher licencing in Ghana. And I have to say that there has been a lot of resistance—not only from the teachers, but also from the wider society—to this idea that you don't become a qualified teacher until you've been licenced, and "licenced" means that you have to take and pass a professional exam. The licencing exam focuses on numeracy, literacy, and general professional skills. And I know of teachers who have completed their formal teacher training and have a bachelor's degree in education but have failed the licencing exams. That has raised this question, "Okay, if these teachers cannot pass this licencing exam, then what has their training prepared them to do?"

So, this new policy in Ghana has caused a lot of controversy. And it creates a lot of expectations for the teachers who are coming out of training these days. It's very different from teachers who were coming out from training five or ten years ago, when the idea was that once you've had your formal training, then you've become a qualified teacher and you're going straight to a school to teach. But now the whole teacher policy is shifting to say, "No, to enter the profession, you have to pass a professional exam." And not only that, but you have to be able to demonstrate over time that you are building on your competence—so you have to keep a record of your own development, and this will become the basis for your professional development and promotion.

This is very new in Ghana, and it's something teacher educators have struggled with because it raises questions about what has gone into teacher training and how you judge a good quality teacher. These are some of the new norms that are changing the nature of the profession in Ghana, but I don't think it's stabilised yet. The current government in Ghana, which introduced the licencing, is very much for it. But the opposition parties have indicated an interest in changing this policy if they win power—they will scrap it. So, there's a lot of political debate around these things.

For a related observation on administrative rules and accountability structures can constrain teachers' autonomy and creativity, see interlocutor Carlos Vargas Tamez's remarks in [Chapter 15](#).

Akyeampong, K. (2020). Transforming Teacher Preparation for Development of Education in Ghana: Challenges, Progress and Prospects. In L. Lefty & J. W. Frazer (Eds.), *Teaching the World's Teachers* (pp. 179–198). John Hopkins University Press. <https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/title/teaching-worlds-teachers>.

LUIS

I think Kwame is quite right. I don't have enough experience in Ghana to be able to refer to the cases that he mentioned, but if you look at the issue of teacher training and education generally, in a lot of countries there was a perceived need to have better and better trained teachers. In fact, teacher training colleges were undermined, and it was declared that teachers needed to have a bachelor's degree from a university. But the problem is partly that, again, teaching and education itself are not seen as a serious enterprise. The training and the education that teachers got was not about how to achieve results, but more around the philosophy and the sociology of education. This is very different from a profession such as engineering, where you do get taught physics and you get taught the principles—but you also get taught, you know, how do you actually build a bridge that doesn't fall down? How do you make a road that the cars can actually travel on, and how should it be angled if there's a curve and you're going at speed? And so on. My sense is that as many systems try to get better teachers and put them into universities, there was relatively little introspection around what the university education is all about.

If I may use another anecdote—this was in the United States—I have a friend who had been trained as an economist, but then decided that she wanted to learn more about teaching because she wanted to work in the education sector. So she enrolled in some university courses on teaching. And she was shocked that in so many of the courses that she took, the main message is that because of sociological and structural issues in society, she was essentially destined to fail as a teacher. There was no emphasis on pedagogy, on how you actually teach, because the whole thing was sort of an indoctrination about how American society has become so terrible that it's essentially hopeless. And one can imagine what would happen to the engineering profession if the whole message of its training was that it's impossible to build bridges.

So I think there was a true de-professionalisation in the sense that the emphasis in teacher education became this superficial intellectual pursuit, rather than actually learning how to do things. And certainly there's a lot of room for philosophical inquiry in a true education, but there also has to be some emphasis on how you actually do things—which I think has been forgotten because education has been depreciated. Therefore, it becomes acceptable to essentially engage in intellectual games at university training, instead of engaging in pedagogical practice and true philosophical inquiry.

For a related conceptual framework, see the description of systemwide purpose and technical practices to further that purpose in Kaffenberger, M. (forthcoming). The role of "purpose" in education system outcomes: A conceptual framework and empirical examples. RISE Working Paper Series.

YUE-YI

This makes me think that maybe the aspirational model we need for teacher education isn't the sort of master's degree that's a pre-PhD preparation in theory and research methods, but more like a US-style Master of Fine Arts, where it's still an academic programme, but there's a strong emphasis on, say, workshops connecting theory and practice.

LUIS

Exactly.

Standards, support, and mutual accountability (and how all of these must match their contexts)

YUE-YI

Kwame, this point about models of professionalisation relates to something you said previously about teachers being socialised into professional autonomy or a lack thereof. And sometimes there seems to be a tension in conversations about improving the status of the teaching profession, in that on the one hand, the ideal is for teachers to be trusted as autonomous professionals. But, on the other hand, for that trust to be warranted, there is an expectation of a certain standard or benchmark of quality—and in systems that are currently low performing, typically those standards or benchmarks are externally imposed, which seems to push against professional autonomy.

KWAME

Yes, you're right. You know, I've been a teacher in Ghana, I've trained teachers, and I've been to classrooms with teachers. And I think that many people who talk about standards sometimes don't really understand the world of teachers and the environment in which they work. To start with, 70 percent of the teachers in Ghana are working in environments which they were not trained to work in—I mean schools in rural communities where challenges are different and often the resources are limited. So the idea that you have a homogeneous set of standards that every teacher should be judged on is just something that I am not very comfortable with. And often these standards do not reflect the realities of teachers' lives and the challenges they face. If these standards are to be met, then teachers also need at least the basic resources and working conditions to meet them.

So, I think we need to be a bit humbler and say, "Yes, the aspiration is to have a high level of competencies and standards, which is good, but we have to take a step back and look at where we are." What kind of environments do teachers work in? What is the support structure for teachers? Where do they live and how do they get to school? These may look trivial, but they are very important if you want to improve quality. I've been with teachers who walk about an hour and a half to get to school. Of course, when they get there, they are tired which can affect their performance. And in many cases, that's also the reason why they don't attend regularly. But I think for those of us in the policy world, our image of a primary school classroom is often very far removed from the reality for many teachers. When we craft our policies, we think, "Okay, if we can get teachers to aspire to these standards, that will improve quality." Well, that's

true, but what are the conditions that you need for those standards to be met by those teachers? And do those conditions really exist? If they don't exist, then don't talk to me about standards. Often, we don't look at the other side of the equation, and I think this creates some of the problems that we face.

YUE-YI

That's so true. And I think it relates closely to what Luis was saying earlier about mutual accountability.

LUIS

Right. And because there is an issue of mutual accountability, and both sides of the relationship are broken, then there is a very serious chicken-and-egg problem of, "Where do you start?" The implicit belief of many development agencies seems to be that you can start by having those standards that teachers have to adhere to; especially if they're outcome standards, namely that your kids are supposed to be able to read and do simple arithmetic, let's say by the end of Grade 2. But the teachers don't know the techniques for doing that in a way that's clearly and self-evidently effective—such that if the teacher were to apply these techniques, then the results would be almost guaranteed—and the government doesn't support them in acquiring those techniques. And if you're put into the situation where you have to produce, but you don't know how and the system has never trained you to do so, then you begin to absorb the sense that the whole thing is a bit of a game. So the whole relationship, and the mutuality of that relationship, becomes devalued.

I think the answer is that you can't start only by demanding accountability for standards. You have to strengthen both sides at the same time. Typically, that hasn't been done in the reform efforts of the past 20 or 25 years or so—until the emphasis on actually having skills, particularly in foundational learning, has come in more recently. And that is a hopeful thing, because it's finally begun to spread the awareness that if you do support the teachers and give them the skills that they need, then the kids will learn, and it can create a kind of rebirth of the mutuality of that accountability.

KWAME

Yes. And sometimes when I listen to the whole discussion about learning loss and learning crisis, I think to myself, "Do these people who write this actually spend time with teachers in some of these poor areas and actually experience their circumstances first-hand?" If you go to Malawi, where I've worked, primary school class can have 120 or 150 students. What standard do you want to place on that teacher who has 150 children in the classroom and has so few resources? So, you need to have a balance between the standards that you have for teachers and the standards that you have for the state so that teachers can meet their standards. But we tend to talk about one side without the other.

For a related observation on how the discourse on accountability often focuses disproportionately on teachers' actions without examining the actions of those who should be supporting teachers, see interlocutor Barbara Tournier's remarks in [Chapter 13](#).

In Ghana, I've always argued that if you want teachers to have professional development and to include professional development in promotion criteria, then it is your responsibility as the state to make sure that every teacher can have professional development opportunities. So it shouldn't be that a teacher who is in the city can easily access professional development opportunities and gain promotion and improve their practice, but a teacher in a rural area cannot access that. And in many countries in the Global South, we don't have just one homogenous system. We talk about teacher education and schools as if they are one—far from it. There are many, very different systems and microsystems, and the conditions under which they work are very different. So, if you have just one standard, whose standard are you using to judge and to help these teachers? And I think we need a reinterpretation of these standards to reflect the conditions under which teachers work so that they can be much more realistic.

LUIS

I very much agree. And I think I would make the claim even stronger, in the sense that it's not just a matter of providing teachers with that support, but it is the state's responsibility to make sure that the support actually works. Because you could say, "We're going to promote teachers based on whether they've taken certain courses," and you make the courses available to everyone, including the deeply rural teachers, so that they can advance in their profession. But if those courses are themselves not about how to actually achieve results, or if they may be giving the teachers some ideas that don't actually work in the classroom, then it again creates in the teacher's mind the sense that, "This is all just a ritual. It's all a game. If I take a certain course, I'll get paid more, regardless of whether I apply that knowledge, and regardless of whether applying that knowledge will actually help the kids to learn more."

So this is just to emphasise the point that if we increase the amount of support that's given to teachers in the context of an accountability system where we expect certain standards from them, then it is the state's responsibility not only to provide that support, but to make sure that the support is actually practical and leads to more learning in the classroom.

Expansion of educational provision and decline in respect for teachers

YUE-YI

That makes a lot of sense. We're well into discussing the "how" question, which is about approaches for reorienting teacher norms toward systemwide improvement in education. And as you answer this, Kwame, I wanted to pose a sub-question to you specifically, given that you've written with Paul Bennell about the decline in respect for teachers in some areas of the Global South. So as you respond to this prompt about

For more of Kwame's insights on teacher education, see Akyeampong, K. (2022). Teaching at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Teacher Education in Poor and Marginalized Communities. In D. A. Wagner, N. M. Castillo, & S. Grant Lewis (Eds.), *Learning, Marginalization, and Improving the Quality of Education in Low-income Countries* (pp. 77–112). Open Book Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0256.03>.

For one example of such box-ticking training courses, see Revina, S., Pramana, R. P., Fillaili, R., & Suryadarma, D. (2020). Systemic Constraints Facing Teacher Professional Development in a Middle-Income Country: Indonesia's Experience Over Four Decades. RISE Working Paper Series. 20/054. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2020/054. One of the study's authors, Shintia Revina, speaks further about challenges in Indonesia's teaching profession in an interview in [Chapter 7](#).

Bennell, P., & Akyeampong, K. (2007). *Teacher Motivation in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia*. Department for International Development: Educational Papers.

approaches for reorienting teacher norms for the betterment of education, it would be great if you could also reflect on ways to restore the respect to the profession and the motivation teachers feel due to that respect.

KWAME

That's a very important point. We have to remember that in different periods in every country, particularly in the Global South, you have different types of people coming into the teaching profession. In many countries, in the 1950s and 60s, or in the post-independence era, teachers were some of the most respected people, because within the community they were the most literate, most educated people. And there was a reverence for teaching and for teachers, which made the profession very attractive and relatively well paid. But over time, the people who have become teachers are not the same as those who became teachers in the previous era. So, the people who are becoming teachers, these days, have different expectations and different aspirations from those earlier teachers. In terms of their respect, they have seen a decline in the society's valuing of their contribution. They've seen a decline in the way in which they are perceived. And teachers are constantly vilified—if anything is wrong, it's because of the teachers. So, you're not going to get many people who feel very excited about the profession.

For a related observation about the decline of teachers' status in the context of Ethiopia, see remarks from interlocutor Belay Hagos in [Chapter 7](#).

I'll give an example. In Ghana, some years ago, the students who would become teachers moved straight from secondary school to go into teacher training colleges, while their counterparts would go to university. So, they're of similar age, but teacher training was seen as a continuation of their secondary education, so their lives were controlled in ways that were very different from their counterparts who go to university. So, this sometimes leads to some resentment. I remember we said to teacher education colleges, "Why don't you let the trainee teachers wear their own clothing, so they don't have to wear a uniform?" And it was very difficult to get the colleges to change this because the society expected teachers to be dressed and behave in a certain way. But these expectations were originally there for earlier teachers—whereas the more recent teachers would resent these kinds of expectations and yet our policies do not even consider these as relevant. It is about asking, "What do we need to change to attract those we consider the best candidates into teaching?" It is not only about raising entry qualifications, but also improving the experience of learning to become a teacher which says something about our respect for the profession. We will not attract the best if the profession lacks respect and the conditions are poor.

I think this is one reason why we are having a lot of challenges within society about respect for the teachers. In many African systems, people's image of the good teacher is often based on some idea from a different era when teachers were seen in a very positive way. Now, the people who currently go into teaching are very different; often they are choosing teaching as a last resort and we haven't introduced standards and expectations that sufficiently reflect who is coming into teaching, why, and what we need to do differently to retain and get the best out of them. And I think this is why they often don't enjoy much respect in the societies in which they work.

LUIS

Yes, I think that's right. And I would add that a lot of this is tied to the need to create massive-scale education systems—which has taken place at different times depending on the continent and the education level. Let's say at the secondary level, in Latin America this was in the 1960s and 70s, and maybe more recently in most of Africa. So 50, 60, or 70 years ago in most Latin American countries, in a medium-sized country there might have been ten high schools in the entire country. So the people who got selected into being the headteachers of those schools were often already the most respected people in the community—because you only have to find ten of them. And often the minister knew them by name and knew their families, and if not the minister then maybe the district superintendent or the province superintendent knew the person's family and their social ties.

As systems democratised, then instead of having ten high schools, you have a thousand high schools or more in a country. But the systems did not implement the right managerial changes to be able to handle this—or they adopted the managerial changes, but only in a very superficial way. So the kinds of knowledge and deep relationships that the minister might have had with every single head teacher 70 years ago obviously cannot be duplicated. Instead, now it's been bureaucratised—but, to go back to the RISE systems analysis, it's been bureaucratised in a way that Lant Pritchett would say is isomorphic mimicry. In other words, there's been an introduction of superficial bureaucratic standards that don't require a deep knowledge of the person who is teaching or how they are teaching, And this is because, in a sense, you're not taking education seriously—and, therefore, you're not willing to invest in the depth of bureaucratic management that you need to ensure quality. So it's a kind of thoughtless massification has resulted in the devaluing of headteachers and teachers.

YUE-YI

One observation related both to Kwame's remarks about societal perceptions of teachers and your remarks, Luis, about changes during educational expansion is something that the Malaysian academic Khoo Khay Jin pointed out to me back when I was doing my undergrad thesis research. He said something like, "You know, back in the day in Malaysia, teacher training college was the thing you went into if you just barely didn't qualify for university. And when it was just a very small percentage of people who went to university, it meant that those going into teacher training were still very committed to education. And then the government made teaching into a degree-level course and tried to expand higher education more generally—so now the target is like 30 or 40 or 50 percent of people going to university—but teacher education is still seen as the thing that you do if you're just barely not good enough for the more prestigious degree courses, so the people going in to teacher education are much further down the distribution of educational commitment."

On isomorphic mimicry, see Pritchett (2014) and Pritchett (2018); full references in a sidenote above.

For another conceptual distinction related to deep versus superficial knowledge and relationships in education systems, see thick/account-based versus thin/accounting-based relationships as discussed by interlocutor Dan Honig in [Chapter 4](#), as well as in Honig, D., & Pritchett, L. (2019). *The Limits of Accounting-Based Accountability in Education (and Far Beyond): Why More Accounting Will Rarely Solve Accountability Problems*. RISE Working Paper 19/030. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2019/030.

LUIS

I've never thought of it that way, but that's really useful. A related point that many in the US have noted is that when the only professions open to women were teaching or nursing, then the smartest women were going into teaching or nursing because they had no other choice. And then once the labour market opened up for women because societies became more progressive and so forth—which is of course a very good thing—there was a side effect that you no longer had that sort of captive labour force of really talented people. Now that dynamic doesn't apply to many other countries, but certainly it's something that gets blamed as one possible cause of the education system not being as good anymore in the US as it was a 50 years ago or 70 years ago.

For a related observation on how the feminisation of the teaching profession in the US has contributed to its vulnerability to accountability reforms based on precedent in “higher-status” fields such as business management or defence, see Mehta, J. (2013). *The allure of order: High hopes, dashed expectations, and the troubled quest to remake American schooling*. Oxford University Press.

Bringing real classroom challenges into teacher training; using demonstration effects to spread good teaching practices

YUE-YI

Related to this and to the “*how*” question, I'd be keen to hear from both of you about where you might see any entry points for changing and revitalising the image of teachers to a different and respected one. Is it something that needs to come from the profession itself, or from civil society, or political leaders, or the education bureaucracy?

KWAME

That's a very good question. Going back to what I said earlier, we sometimes think that we can fix some of these problems by introducing policy changes or maybe getting the profession to agree to certain norms and standards. But I don't think it works that way. If you want a different type of teaching profession, you have to start by asking, “What kind of teacher do we want in society?” We haven't asked that question yet in a meaningful way.

And after we agree on what we want, then can you ask, “Okay, how do you produce that teacher?” And for that question I would go back to the training, to teacher education. Because in all my research, teacher education leaves a longer-term impression on what teachers do, a stronger hold on who they are—their professional identity—than any kind of reform or intervention you introduce after. So, I would say that if you really want to have a change in the way in which teachers work and see themselves and are seen by society, you've got to go back to how they are socialised into becoming teachers.

You know, one of the things that I have noticed in my own research is how much you can learn from going to a college where teachers are trained. I'll challenge everybody

to try, when you visit any African education system, to go into a teacher training college and see what happens there. We don't tend to do that. We go into schools and classrooms—but these teachers have come from somewhere. And you would realise very clearly that the process of becoming a teacher in these colleges is not very much centred on the learner and how you know they are learning. It's much more about what teachers are expected to do—it is about standard teaching behaviours which is then assumed will produce good learning. So, it's very regimented along certain lines, and this is what defines them as a teacher and how they judged themselves as good teachers.

We did some research where I went to sit in a college in Kenya and looked at the teachers and then followed them into the school to see what they were doing. And we filmed what they were doing in school and brought images of that back to the teacher educators in the college. And the teacher educators were shocked. "Why are the teachers behaving this way?" I said, "Because you haven't brought the real world of teaching and learning into the college, and so the children are not learning." Yet when we asked the teachers, they all said, "I've done a good job. I've taught the lesson." Well, how do you know children have learned? "Oh, some of them raised their hands in class, and I marked their work in the exercise books." But when we show them very clearly why learning is not taking place, they are puzzled. And the teacher educators are also puzzled about why the teachers are not able to effect learning. And it's because of the training because they weren't trained to be able to recognise and solve learning problems in real classrooms.

As you see from my work, I'm very passionate about the training of teachers. Because if you really want to change the way teachers perform in the classroom and equip them in a way which would allow them to become more effective in the classroom, you have to start questioning how they are trained. You have to look at the environment in which they are trained. You have to look at the expectations that are placed upon them. Because after they spend three or four years going through that training, which forms their professional identity, you stand very little chance of actually making lasting change especially if the pattern and expectations continue in the professional community, they become a part of.

See, for example, Akyeampong, K., Pryor, J., Westbrook, J., & Lussier, K. (2011). *Teacher Preparation and Continuing Professional Development in Africa: Learning To Teach Early Reading and Maths*. University of Sussex Centre for International Education. <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=tpa-synthesis-report-july2011.pdf&site=320>.

YUE-YI

Luis, any thoughts on other entry points?

LUIS

I think the entry point of teacher training and teacher support is a very good one. The only nuance that I would add is that, at least in a lot of countries that I have worked in, the rate of turnover in the profession is fairly low. Because for people who have a certain social background, if they maybe did not have the best marks and therefore couldn't get into engineering or accounting or medicine or law, they became teachers. And we know that's often the case. From their point of view, teaching is not such a bad

job to have, you know. Maybe the yearly income isn't that high, but the hourly income isn't bad when you take into account vacations and leave and so on. And there are fringe benefits and stability, so maybe you don't live a well-to-do life, but at least you got a pension. So these aren't bad jobs, and people hold on to them. Unlike in, let's say, the US or the UK or Canada or some other rich country where maybe the turnover rate is 10 or 15 percent per year, in a lot of these countries it's 1 or 2 percent per year.

So, you see, preservice training cannot be the only entry point. We also have to look at in-service training and the support that's provided once the teacher is already in the classroom. Otherwise, if you only rely on preservice, it's just going to take too long because there's just not that much infusion into the profession from the colleges and universities. That's a really small point that I would add.

For a related observation on the complementarity between preservice and in-service training, see interlocutor David Evans' remarks in [Chapter 11](#).

YUE-YI

That makes sense. Any other thoughts on the "how", about approaches for changing teacher norms that you want to get on the table?

LUIS

Well, I would bring up the power of demonstration. A lot of countries are so mired in ineffective ways of teaching and managing teachers and schools that it's very difficult for there to be emulation of good practice. Sure, there are a few schools here and there that are beating the odds. But the government and the support system doesn't study those schools and spread those practices to the other schools. Or, to come back to a theme that we've hit upon a quite a bit in this conversation, the government simply hasn't provided for effective ways of doing things in the classroom.

So I think that if you insist on the standards, and you put some accountability on the teachers, and you are accountable to them by helping them with effective techniques, then that that can exert a demonstration effect and can begin to spread. But even that spread itself has to be normed and incentivised. The ministry has to take a serious interest in how the demonstration happens and how practices spread.

See also remarks from interlocutor Alice Cornish in [Chapter 14](#) on teachers' reference networks, remarks from interlocutor Wendy Kopp in [Chapter 5](#) on the power of exposure in shifting norms, and the exchange between interlocutors Katlego Sengadi and Lucy Crehan in [Chapter 6](#) on changing teachers' beliefs by showing that change is possible in their classroom contexts. For a discussion of a study in Pakistan exploring the challenges of spreading demonstrated change beyond individual schools, see interlocutor Masooda Bano's remarks in [Chapter 9](#).

Prioritising teaching (rather than teacher) quality, and moving toward depth and problem solving in classroom practice

YUE-YI

Thanks, Luis. Do either of you have any last thoughts that you'd like to share, maybe something that maybe occurred to you earlier but didn't fit in with the flow of the conversation?

KWAME

If I can add one thing, it's that we tend to talk about teacher quality, and I prefer to talk about teaching quality. Because with teacher quality we tend to look for the traits or qualities of a good teacher. But, you see, the teaching profession is a community—and if we instead talk about teaching quality and improving teaching quality, which would then impact on learning, then we can talk about how teaching quality is improved through the community of practice. It is when teachers themselves take responsibility in that community to improve their teaching, then you see improvements in teacher quality.

We don't often talk about this. And we don't nurture and promote it sufficiently so that teachers learn to improve their practice within the school environment in which they work. Instead, we look for certain qualities of a good teacher—but that doesn't exist in isolation. It has to be part of the community of practice because that's how quality is communicated and formed.

For a related perspective on the teaching/teacher distinction, see the quote from Stigler & Hiebert (1999) in [Chapter 1](#) of this volume. Stigler, J. W., & Hiebert, J. (1999). *The teaching gap: Best ideas from the world's teachers for improving education in the classroom*. The Free Press.

YUE-YI

That's such a good reminder. Especially because quality is dynamic rather than static. And no classroom is a closed system, right?

KWAME

Yes, and it's about problem solving in teaching. I always say that every teacher is either a bad problem solver or a good problem solver. If they're good problem solvers, when they engage in some activities in the classroom and things aren't going as planned, they will be able to identify the problem and find ways to solve it. "This year I have a group of children in my class; next year I'll have a different cohort; or maybe within the class I have children from different backgrounds with different needs. And I'm actually in the business of solving all the different problems that they face so that I'm actually helping them to learn. And I use different tools. I tried this, and it doesn't work, so I'll try that. And I'm forming my own knowledge base of teaching through solving problems in the classroom." So teaching is all about problem solving. But I don't think we emphasise that sufficiently in the training of teachers so that they can enter into the class as problem solvers. This is particularly so in poorer countries where teaching quality is often so poor that policymakers think the best thing to do is give teachers scripts to teach from—but that assumes every child in front of that teacher is similar. You can't write a script that takes care of every child and place it in the hands of a teacher who cannot vary the script to meet different learning needs.

But I want to end by reflecting on the learning crisis. A lot of expectations are placed on teachers to address this learning crisis. There's a lot of research which identifies what teachers are not capable of doing and what they need to do instead. And often it's research which identifies certain traits that teachers don't have and what interventions we need to help them to improve. I think that much of this research is

helpful. But I just don't see enough research which really gives me confidence that we are equipping teachers to be able to solve those problems.

If I can use a scientific metaphor, I don't think there's enough activation energy for teachers to change to address the learning crisis, in the way we've constructed it. To get to the position where this change is possible, you have to look very closely at how they see themselves, how we judge their success and communicate this to them. Because in many systems—in Ghana, for example—when teachers are being assessed, it is not on the basis of what learning takes place. At best, it's a very narrow definition of learning, but usually it is whether the teachers have exhibited certain behaviours. And once they've executed those behaviours, that's fine. And this is what gets into the heads of teachers, that “This is what a quality teacher is, if I can exhibit these behaviours.” Not the outcome of these behaviours, but just the demonstration of these behaviours. And I think we need to shift that narrative much more to the outcomes of the behaviours rather than the behaviours themselves.

YUE-YI

That makes a lot of sense. Your turn for last words, Luis.

LUIS

Maybe I'll just wrap it up by tying the discussion to critical themes in the RISE Programme. And I've already said it, but a lot of the issues have to do with the fact that 50, 60, or 70 years ago, the systems were drawing from the elite of the society to educate the elite of the society. So, as I was saying, the minister might personally know the headteachers in all the high schools in the country, and the relationship of respect between the teacher and the ministry was very personal and very deep. Then we massified those education systems and so they now have 1,000 secondary schools, or even 10,000. And yet we haven't built management systems that are systemic—so that you no longer need to rely on informal personal knowledge—but also have the depth that the previous informal systems had. Instead, we've systematised in a very shallow and bureaucratic way, without the necessary depth.

For example, inspectors or quality assurance officers may approach the teacher with a shallow checklist; maybe a minute-by-minute observation of the lesson and a checklist for whether the teachers uses a variety of techniques. But they may not have the depth to assess whether the teacher is successfully engaging the students. That is much harder to observe, but not at all impossible. And you have to know that it is important to observe to start with. The best teachers I have seen are able to rivet the children's attention and are able to keep them fully engaged, at least in short intense bursts of activity, and they have a keen “sense” of the room. These things are partly inborn, and partly acquired through practice and through being coached.

This issue of teacher support and teacher accountability is perhaps the most concrete expression of that breakdown, of that inability for the system to be massive

For a related discussion on the tension between systemwide accountability and vital but invisible relationships between teachers and students, see remarks from interlocutors Dan Honig and Sharath Jeevan remarks in [Chapter 4](#).

KWAME AKYEAMPONG & LUIS CROUCH

and yet to have depth. And the hallmark of this depth is that you have to take the whole enterprise very seriously. It has to be a deeply felt commitment of the society and the government, not a mere ritual that you do because you signed on to the SDGs or the MDGs. It needs to be something very deeply felt and very serious. And you see that in places like Korea and China, but you do not see it in many of the developing countries that are often the targets have a lot of donor aid. Rather, you sometimes get the sense that they're doing things in a fairly ritualistic way. Again, there's isomorphic mimicry.

YUE-YI

A bracing challenge to end on.

LUIS

But I do think there's hope. You can see change in some countries—like Kenya, some states in India, in Latin America. So I'm hopeful.

CHAPTER 13

On re-professionalisation, collaboration, teacher voice, and balancing accountability and support

Barbara Tournier & Juliet Wajega

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Juliet Wajega is Uganda co-ordinator of the Work: No Child's Business alliance, which focuses on ending child labour in Cote d'Ivoire, India, Jordan, Mali, Uganda, and Vietnam. Previously, she was Deputy General Secretary of the Uganda National Teacher's Union (UNATU), one of the largest and strongest unions in Africa with a membership of over 160,000 teachers. In that capacity, she also represented the teaching profession on the board of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE).



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YUE-YI

Let me jump in with the first question. Can you tell us about a story or an experience or an incident that illustrates to you how norms among teachers can affect their

practice, especially if it affects it in ways that might not have been anticipated by the official rules or by prior expectations?

JULIET

Barbara, you go first.

BARBARA

I can start by highlighting three dominant beliefs—or norms, as you’ve defined them—around the teaching profession that I thought of when reflecting for this interview.

The narratives that we’re observing around us and in the press is that the teacher profession in both the Global North and the Global South has lost some of its attractiveness, and teachers are sometimes demotivated. The narrative that is relayed is one of poor pay and few opportunities for career progression—and, as a result, is making the profession unattractive to younger generations. And we’re also hearing about how teachers are overburdened with administrative tasks, and that they’re isolated in their classroom with low levels of support, and they don’t have much of a voice in policy formulation.

This was particularly striking during the pandemic because there was a great dissonance between the essential role that teachers play in our society and the status that is currently attached to the profession. So it’s a question of: how can we reverse this situation? And I think we need to give the profession a new impetus and, in a way, modernise it.

So, the three dominant beliefs that I wanted to speak to are, one, the fact that teachers have few opportunities for career advancement although they often have lifetime employment—and how can we deconstruct that? The second one is the idea that we need to control teachers’ work—and again, how can we go against that? And the third one, which is related to this control and accountability discourse, is the perception that teaching involves working alone—and, again, how can we find ways to reverse that?

With regards to teachers having few opportunities for career advancement and lifetime employment, this very much relates to the work that we conducted on teacher career reforms. The starting point was the fact that it’s widely accepted that teachers can start their career as a classroom teacher and retire as a classroom teacher with a moderate increase in salary over the years. And so we were curious to learn from the experiences of countries that implemented teacher career pathways to try to reverse that idea and diversify the options that are open to teachers, by offering classroom teachers the possibility of gradually assuming more responsibilities and getting the recognition that goes with taking on more responsibilities—whether recognition in the

For a related perspective from Juliet, see Wajega, J. (2021, October 5). Teachers must be at the heart of post-Covid education recovery. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/eac8c311-f0e5-4bb8-9b0f-51ea5ed0b968>.

See <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/our-expertise/teacher-careers>; Tournier, B., & Chimier, C. (2019). *Teacher career reforms: Learning from experience*. IIEP-UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000372505>; and Crehan, L. (2016). *Exploring the impact of career models on teacher motivation*. IIEP-UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246252>.

form of a salary increase or through opportunities for professional growth. I'll share my thoughts about the other two norms later on.

JULIET

Maybe I'll just begin by sharing my personal story as a teacher. I was teaching science—chemistry and biology—and this was in a private school. And of course for private schools there is this sense of competition, where you must show results and students must pass so that they're able to attract more students to join their school. In that school, they would really expect you to teach and complete the syllabus, and to go through all the test questions within a very short time, such that children can pass exams and the school can attract more students to join it.

From my personal experience, this will affect your classroom planning and your teaching. You are just expected to complete the syllabus, regardless of what the learners need, so you ignore other aspects of learning. And then, also, because you must make sure that your students pass, it's hard to have your own vision as a teacher. You are always under some pressure from the administration. So it affects your practice as a teacher. It affects your professional ethics. You may want to do something visionary, but you're under pressure. And, of course, it also affects the students—you don't allow them to be innovative because you're just not giving them enough time. And all of this is something that I saw as being not very right. So that is my personal story.

In my work in African countries, another thing that I've seen related to norms about the behaviour of teachers is that they expect you to come to school at a certain time, but if you're not living near the school then this can be very difficult. So, in a way, there are these other issues that affect norms.

One other issue is also that the policies from the ministry often do not really involve teachers in the process. So they can they put in place some things that are a bit unrealistic.

YUE-YI

Thanks, Juliet. One of the other interview participants said, "You know, there are teachers who have to walk one and a half hours to get to school. So once they get there, they'll be tired, and that affects their teaching."

JULIET

Yes, that's true.

For a related firsthand account of how pressures from exams, the curriculum, and educational administrators can hamper teachers' classroom aspirations, see the opening example from interlocutor Katlego Sengadi in [Chapter 6](#) on her experience as a novice teacher in Botswana. See also examples from interlocutor Maria Teresa Tatto in [Chapter 11](#) on similar experiences in the US and remarks from interlocutor Ying-yi Hong in [Chapter 9](#) about ongoing attempts in Hong Kong to shift away from extrinsically driven, exam-oriented classroom climates toward intrinsically driven, creative approaches.

Paraphrased from interlocutor Kwame Akyeampong's remarks in [Chapter 12](#).

The influence of school leadership appointments, formal regulations, and peer networks on teacher norms

YUE-YI

You've both started to talk about teachers being caught between different tensions and pressures that affect their work in maybe ways that aren't too beneficial, and you've also both mentioned how teachers often aren't empowered as much as they should be in decision-making and policy influence. But before we move on from this part of the conversation, which is about the "*what*" of teacher norms, are there any other influential norms that shape teacher practice that you would like to get on the table?

BARBARA

I'd like to share some personal stories—because these stories do make things a lot more lively, and certainly my choices and my research interests are oriented by experiences in the field. So maybe I'll share a couple of them, to give you an idea.

The work on teacher careers was really influenced by a project that we conducted in an East African country. And we realised that teachers were working in very difficult conditions, but also that there were no career opportunities for them—and that appointments were often of a very political nature. So, for example, someone could be appointed as a headteacher although he was very young and new to the school, because he had political backing. And that made teachers feel really demotivated and demoralised. Also, there were no criteria in place for who could be appointed to leadership positions.

From my more recent work in a West African country, what we've seen—and this is something that is not new to us—is the fact that often meaningful norms, understood here in terms of rules and regulations, and standards either do not exist, or they are not applied. There are good reasons for this. Perhaps laws have changed but decrees do not follow as fast as they should, and that results in some blurriness around norms that should be applied, which in turn results in diverse applications across districts, which then has effects on the management of the workforce. And this shows that there's really a strong need to strengthen HR procedures and make sure that there are operational manuals in place, and that everybody is following the same norms.

YUE-YI

Thanks, Barbara. Do you want to respond, Juliet?

For similar observations about teacher and school leader positions being allocated as political rewards, see interlocutor David Evans' remarks in [Chapter 11](#) and interlocutor Yamini Aiyar's remarks in [Chapter 8](#).

JULIET

I just wanted to add something about how norms can change, especially if teachers work together and there's some cooperation, either within the schools or across schools. I saw this in a programme called STiR, where they bring together teachers from different schools, and then they share experiences—so there was peer exchange. We could see that there was some change in teacher norms because of this, like change in the way they teach or the way they plan their lessons. So that kind of collaboration, I think, is very powerful in effecting norms change among these teachers. This was something that I saw practically.

For an overview of STiR's work, see <https://stireducation.org/what-we-do/our-approach/>. For an interview with STiR Education founder Sharath Jeevan and fellow interlocutor Dan Honig, see [Chapter 4](#).

YUE-YI

Great. And that's getting us into the "why" and the "how". So let's stay with the "why" for a little bit, which is the question of why do different norms emerge? And why do some norms become strong whereas in other settings, like Barbara saying, sometimes it just seems like there are no real norms at all?

Juliet, I think you were mentioning that sometimes collaboration and peer relationships can be a reason why certain norms emerge. Are there other factors or other relationships between stakeholders that affect teacher norms?

JULIET

Yes, the kind of leadership in the schools also plays a role. For instance, we have the administrative and school governance structures, and the way the headteachers relate to the teachers—these can also contribute to how norms change.

Deprofessionalisation, devaluation, and accountability in the teaching profession

BARBARA

Norms are constantly evolving, and they are influenced by the broader context. As I was saying at the beginning, the status of the profession has declined. So what happened? I think in the Global South it was because countries were encouraged to recruit massively to meet Education for All goals, and they lowered entry requirements to do so. So that had a certain effect on de-professionalising the role of the teacher. In the Global North, you've got, similarly, unattractive employment packages and difficult working conditions, along with changes in school governance and high-stakes testing, which are turning candidates away from the jobs.

Another trend that has also contributed to influencing norms affecting teachers is the whole debate around accountability. There were some neoliberal trends that started in the 1980s, which included a shift in the debate from educational access

For a related perspective on the rapid expansion of education systems, see remarks from interlocutor Luis Crouch in [Chapter 12](#). Also in that chapter, Luis' observations on mutual accountability also relate to comments from Juliet and Barbara about accountability and support (or the lack thereof) in the teaching profession in many contexts.

to educational quality, which really put teachers in the limelight. Because teachers are the most important school-level variable in quality, there was a lot of emphasis put on teachers' responsibility for the pupils' learning. And, therefore, there was a move towards a lot of control over teachers and really scrutinising what they were doing. I think it's fair to say that there are positive evolutions in this regard and that there are attempts to move from a more accountability-oriented frame towards a more collaborative frame, where collaboration is really seen as the way forward for improving education systems.

Another trend has also been the decentralisation of education, which has also affected school governance and the role of headteachers, and introduced more school-based management, without necessarily strengthening the middle tier and its capacity to provide support to teachers and head teachers, especially in the area of instructional leadership.

YUE-YI

Juliet, could you reflect on whether you've seen the cross-country trends that Barbara has pointed out playing out for teachers in Uganda or the other countries you've worked in? Whether rapid expansion of the number of teachers, deprofessionalisation, accountability, decentralisation.

JULIET

Actually, what Barbara said is quite true across all countries I am familiar with. Apart from deprofessionalisation, there's also the devaluing of teachers because it's looked at as a profession where they are lowest paid. So that is also a key thing. I think what you have mentioned is very, very true. And apart from the unattractive packages, sometimes they go without being paid. They might teach without being paid for months.

I'd like to also throw more light on the accountability issue. They expect teachers to perform miracles, sometimes in very, very difficult situations. Like, you are in a school setting; you don't have the tools you need to use; but they impose on you certain policies; they change curriculums and you are supposed to deliver the new curriculum without the accompanying training. And then at the end of the day, they expect the learning outcomes to be higher, way beyond your capacity as a teacher. So this accountability issue is also really affecting the teachers a lot, because they expect you to perform without the necessary support.

Another part that is very key is the testing, which we talked about it. And sometimes I have to tell some people that when they talk of learning outcomes, you're only thinking of literacy and numeracy, but there are many other important learning outcomes. And for me, I'm a bit uncomfortable when people from the western world come to us and they say, "Now, in this place, there's no learning." Really, learning does take place—there are those social aspects of learning, but people never really look at them.

For related observations on the erosion of professionalism in teaching, see remarks from interlocutor Jessica Holloway in [Chapter 2](#) and from Maria Teresa Tatto and David Evans in [Chapter 11](#).

Sometimes it is very, very unfair to test only literacy and numeracy, regardless of the other aspects. I think these teachers could be doing a little more than the tests show, but when they are testing, they only test for some very narrow scope of outcomes.

Then, of course, you talked about the decentralisation of education. I think that is also key, and it has also affected education in our setting. But what I can see also as a major issue is that when they're designing education interventions, most of the interventions are from the top to bottom, and teachers don't really get to participate the design. Because of that, in a way, they don't feel confident in the intervention, and there's no ownership, so there's no changing of the norms. Because if I don't feel like I am part of the programme, and I'm not being valued as somebody very important to the process, then I may not really be motivated to say, "Let me change my classroom approaches." So, you see, there is an interplay between many factors.

BARBARA

On accountability, it's very true, what you said about teachers not getting a salary on time and being asked to teach in impossible conditions. And that's one of the reasons why I found the whole discourse on accountability to be really biased because you can't expect teachers to do the impossible if you're not putting them in adequate conditions. I feel that before blaming the teachers or asking teachers to be accountable, education systems need to be accountable to their teachers. And what I mean by that is things like making sure that teachers are paid on time—which should just be a given. It shouldn't be something that teachers have to lose days on. Making sure that teachers have learning materials and resources, and that they're not teaching in overcrowded classrooms. These should be the basics.

So it's about turning the tables around and making sure that education systems are well-managed. Because we talk a lot about how to improve teachers' instructional practices, but if the basic conditions for them to teach are not there, then we have a problem. Also, too much focus on accountability can be detrimental in terms of impacting negatively on teachers' sense of autonomy, mastery, and agency—which is key to their motivation—and needs to be counterbalanced with high levels of support.

Teachers have a fair share in their students' results, but they're not the only ones on the team. You've got to recognise that it should be a whole team around them, supporting them as frontline workers—just like how for a football team you would have many other support staff besides the coach and the players. So if, as the saying goes, it takes a whole village to raise a child, then it also takes a whole education system to support teachers to deliver the best education.

For related perspectives on the importance of teacher participation in designing educational interventions, see remarks from interlocutors Kwame Akyeampong in [Chapter 12](#) and Carlos Vargas Tamez in [Chapter 15](#).

For a related observation on the need for education ministries to consistently provide the compensation packages that have been agreed with teachers, see interlocutor Laura Savage's remarks in [Chapter 15](#).

Teacher autonomy, scripted lessons, and instructional leadership

JULIET

Yes, and I also agree on the issue that teachers also need that professional autonomy. For instance, sometimes they think teachers will not be able to arrange their own lesson plans, to do research—so they just give them already well-designed lesson plans for them to follow word by word. I think that's not right. Such things can also keep teachers from really thinking hard to try and improve their classroom delivery practices. So it has a lot to do with the issue of professional autonomy. Especially ed tech now, where they want to bring already written-out lesson plans for teachers to use, without them thinking or adding anything to what they teach.

YUE-YI

That makes sense, and controlling lessons word-by-word doesn't respect the teacher, and it also doesn't respect the diversity of children's needs and interests.

BARBARA

To build on that, I think there's a point here related to the Barber and Mourshed report about how education systems keep getting better and better, and how countries moved from poor to fair, fair to good, and on to great and excellent. And in the poor to fair category, teachers are given very strict lesson plans and very tight controls on what they're teaching, with relatively low levels of autonomy. And then when the system gets to being excellent, there are high levels of autonomy, and teachers engage in action research, providing new engaging initiatives, and so on.

But when you think about it, while detailed lesson planning is key to provide the essential scaffolding, it shouldn't be overly scripted because there's also a lot of value in, as Juliet was saying, at the same time giving teachers some level of autonomy and asking teachers to collaborate as part of their regular practice—because they know better than anyone else what problems they're facing and how they can collaboratively solve them. And, actually, research shows that it's a much better way of functioning, when you get teachers to collaborate and iterate to solve their problems.

In our research on instructional leaders at the middle tier in education systems—those professionals who directly interface with school staff to improve the quality of teaching and learning (teacher mentors, pedagogical coaches, cluster coordinators, as well as head teachers who act as system leaders)—we are advocating for the middle tier to facilitate a lot more collaboration and discussion among teachers: getting teachers less isolated, making sure teachers can interact across schools around their practices. And that ignites teachers' motivation and gives them more autonomy,

For a related perspective on guiding teachers rather than scripting their lessons, see this blog by David Evans and Benjamin Piper (<https://www.cgdev.org/blog/guiding-teachers-rather-scripting-them>), which draws on a report by Piper, B., Sitabkhan, Y., Mejia, J., & Betts, K. (2018). *Effectiveness of Teachers' Guides in the Global South: Scripting, Learning Outcomes, and Classroom Utilization*. RTI Press. <https://doi.org/10.3768/rtipress.2018.op.0053.1805>.

Mourshed, M., Chijioke, C., & Barber, M. (2010). How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better. McKinsey & Company. http://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/dotcom/client_service/social%20sector/pdfs/how-the-worlds-most-improved-school-systems-keep-getting-better_download-version_final.ashx.

See the Evan & Piper blog cited above, as well as Hargreaves, A., & O'Connor, M. T. (2018). Solidarity with solidarity: The case for collaborative professionalism. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 100(1), 20–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721718797116>. For more on research by Barbara and her collaborators on instructional leadership at the middle tier of education systems, see <https://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/instructional-leaders>.

relatedness, and a sense of mastery, and will undoubtedly contribute to improving teaching practices and student results.

Empowering teachers through professional priorities, supportive systems, and collegial collaboration

YUE-YI

Since we're already discussing it, let's move completely into the question of "how" we can improve teacher norms. You've both been giving us a lot of valuable points related to this, but did I want to start specifically with a question for Juliet.

One theme in this conversation so far has been the disempowerment of teachers and how collaboration can counteract that. Juliet, you've worked in this area for many years, particularly in building teachers' solidarity through unions. I remember hearing you tell a story a union collaboration where you had to prompt the teachers to think not just about bread-and-butter issues, but also about professionalisation. Could I ask you to tell that story again and then to reflect on union work in improving teacher empowerment?

JULIET

Okay, let me tell the story for Barbara to hear. So I was working for teachers' union in Uganda, with Education International. EI introduced a programme on child labour. I was the head of programmes for the union in Uganda, and together with some colleagues we tried to get to our national executive committee, that is the overall the strategic level of the union, to support this programme. So we told them about this programme, and what we want them to contribute, we said that we need to participate in this.

But they were very reluctant. They said, "No. Our work is about improving that teachers' work here in terms of salaries, in terms of their wellbeing." Then we also had a similar response to some professional development courses offered by the Canadian Teachers' Federation—they kept giving us a lot of resistance. They said, "No. You are going to waste a lot of time and resources on issues that are not core to the union."

We had to tell them that if you are to draw attention of others, if you are to be respected, if you are to succeed in whatever you're doing, you also have to show that you have the other part as well, about improving education quality and professionalism. You cannot only do the bread-and-butter part. So slowly, when we started doing these programmes for improvement, they realised that yes, it works. Because if I'm going to talk about a teachers' issues, and I first begin by showing that I care about the learners,

Education International (EI) is a global federation of teacher unions and unions of other education sector personnel. See <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/about/who-we-are>.

then I will draw a lot of public attention already. And if it's an advocacy issue, they will already be listening to you, and you can already get buy-in.

So we slowly moved the whole leadership of the union. And right now, we do have those particular programmes about quality education as well as other issues. We moved away from thinking that if it's a union, you only have to focus on the bread and butter.

YUE-YI

Thanks for that. I really appreciate that story, partly because one thing we've been thinking a lot about at RISE is how education really needs to have a sense of purpose. And what your story conveys is that for teaching to be a profession that's respected, and to be able to say, "We deserve to have these bread-and-butter issues addressed," it's because you can also say, "We have a purpose that we are pursuing and fulfilling."

JULIET

Yes.

YUE-YI

Barbara, did you want to respond to that? Or you could also bring in some of the other thoughts you had on how we can move past all of the challenges related to the three norms you mentioned at the beginning.

BARBARA

I want to add that you can't bypass teachers. If you want to implement new policies, you've got to start with asking teachers about their grievances, and you've got to start by addressing teachers' grievances, because otherwise it's very unlikely that you will get teachers' buy-in—whereas listening to and addressing their grievances will give you got the most likelihood of success. And we also need to recognise that it takes time for some reforms to be accepted and to get teacher buy-in. So I think the point about giving a voice to teachers and getting them more recognised in policymaking processes is also very important in improving also the status of the profession.

In terms of ways to improve—well, coming from IIEP, the first point I want to make is about, like I said earlier, improving the way education systems are managed. And there's a lot that can be done in that area. I've mentioned improving human resources management and procedures, as well as tools, and making sure that we have norms. And those norms are critical because they will determine how many teachers you need to recruit, how many hours they teach, et cetera.

Another point relates to our research on that middle tier of education systems, between the school level and the national level. There's a lot that we don't know

Initial findings from this line of research are available in Childress, D., Chimier, C., Jones, C., Page, E., & Tournier, B. (2020). Change agents: Emerging evidence on instructional leadership at the middle tier. UNESCO IIEP; Education Development Trust; Education Commission. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374918>.

about the middle tier. We've looked at instructional leaders, but there are lots of other roles that need to be investigated. And one of those key roles, for me at least, is human resource managers. We have very little information about how well they are trained and supported to carry out their mission—yet their mission is key for the work that teachers do, because they are in charge of teacher pay and teacher deployment. If they're not adequately supported, and they don't have the right tools to do their job, then at the end of the line you're going to end up with overcrowded classrooms and so on. So the quality of human resource management is very important.

One point that we've hinted at before is the need to gear systems towards more support, trust, collaboration, and professional development, especially in-school professional development. And that was really the most striking thing to us when we were doing our case study research on teacher careers—for example, in New York City, how much teachers really enjoy working together and collaborating and getting feedback from their peers.

In fact, we had originally framed collaboration and peer support as a form of professional development. But if you look into it, there are also subtle accountability mechanisms built into these peer collaborations. This is where you have a fine line between the discourse on accountability and the discourse on collaboration. You can actually find intelligent ways to conceptualise it, rather than saying that all accountability is bad, because you do need some level of accountability—with a level of high challenge, but challenge that comes with high support. And you can induce accountability processes that are actually very beneficial in terms of motivating teachers. So it's all about how you go about it.

Fundamentally, I think it all comes down to really respecting teachers as professionals and recognising that they need to be motivated to do their jobs. And there are a number of different ways to go about doing that. But if you look at motivation theories, then they all show that we need more collaboration, we need to give recognition, and we need to give teachers more agency and make space for their voices.

YUE-YI

Absolutely.

See Crehan, L., Tournier, B., & Chimier, C. (2019). *Teacher career pathways in New York City*. IIEP-UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000367666/PDF/367666eng.pdf.multi>.

For another perspective on intelligent accountability, see philosopher Onora O'Neill's third Reith Lecture: O'Neill, O. (2002, April 17). A question of trust: Called to account (Lecture 3). In Reith Lectures. BBC Radio 4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00gpzdf>. Transcript available at http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/rmhttp/radio4/transcripts/20020417_reith.pdf.

Practical approaches—and real challenges—in strengthening the teaching profession

JULIET

I think you've almost said it all, Barbara. I love all of that—about the trust, the collaboration, the in-school professional development.

I just wanted to mention something about accountability. There was a time in Uganda when they wanted teachers to check in at school. So they introduced these machines, where you'd arrive, you'd check in, then they know you're in school. We were really against it. Because we said, "Teaching is not like a production industry. You must have your heart there." You know, I could come to school and check in, but then I could go to class just sit down without teaching, or maybe the way I teach may not really bring out the learning outcomes that you want. So we also have to look at other ways motivate teachers, not to just force them to be in school. You see, teaching is a very different profession. So that's one point that I wanted to bring out.

Another point is about peer feedback. Something that has worked out for us about peer feedback was a programme we had with Education International, called Quality Educators. How it works out is that the fellow teachers can record a teacher's lesson, or the teacher records her own lesson; and then afterwards they critique it; and they keep learning from one another. So it's also a type of feedback, like Barbara talked about, and it's something that can help improve the way teachers deliver. And it can also lead to change, because you can look at a certain way another teacher teaches, and then you are able to pick up a new practice that you are not doing yet, then you can change and improve.

I also agree about teacher voice. We really need those voices to be present in the advocacy spaces, and present in the policy spaces. So I think those are the key things.

YUE-YI

Juliet, I'd be curious to ask you, from your on-the-ground experience: do you have any tips for helping to build that professional, collegial trust among teachers, or tips for how to amplify teachers' voices in society? Because in research we often write about these things in ways that sound so abstract, when we should get more concrete and practical.

JULIET

For us in the teachers' unions, one way to include teachers' voices, for instance, is that if the union has any policy discussions, we need to at least have the teachers

For more on the Quality Educators programme, see <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/19332:quality-educators-for-all-project-to-receive-top-award>.

present. And you can also have what it is called an opinion watch, where if there's an issue you reach out to the teachers and you consult them. We normally also have workshops for teachers, so we can pick up the issues they are facing, and then we take them up to the higher level. And we had an SMS platform where the teachers could respond if there's an issue, and they could also go through the website—to give their views and comment. So that's how we do it in the teachers' union.

YUE-YI

That all sounds great.

BARBARA

In practice, from our standpoint, if you want to encourage collaboration and peer learning, you've also got to formalise it—and that means, very practically, releasing some time from the teachers' timetables so that they can spend it on collaboration and on opening up their classroom to other teachers. It's about taking those steps and changing the job description. If the job description says that they're responsible for opening their classroom, sharing practices with colleagues, and attending other colleagues' lessons, then that will slowly make these practices normal. But if you don't make room for collaborative practices, then there's no guarantee that they will really be taken on.

And for teachers' voices, I really like what Juliet was saying about having a website and a platform. We saw that in Peru as well, where the government had put up a big platform where teachers could ask their questions and exchange thoughts on teacher careers. And that was also a good way for them to have a direct interaction with the ministry, without necessarily going through the unions—so there were two lines of communication.

Also, in the work that we're doing currently on strengthening middle tier roles, there's this idea that you're getting teachers to engage in policy formulation processes by getting them to collaboratively work on issues that will inform policies, and getting their feedback to inform policy—and the other way around, by putting the effort into translating and communicating new policies to teachers in a way that is understandable to them.

JULIET

I think that's a great point, about translating policies into something that is understandable, bringing it down to the ground level, with actionable points for the teachers to understand.

BARBARA

You know, I think in the development sector, there's some level of alignment, and a lot of people agree that we need to strengthen the teaching profession. And I don't know what it would take. There's obviously financial issues at stake about how much can be done—and I think we have to recognise that things take time.

There's often a tension between what governments can achieve in the short time that they are in power, and the fact that it will take decades for reforms to actually play out. It takes consolidated actions over successive governments to have an impact. I like the fact that in Finland, for example, which is hailed as a real educational success, it's taken decades of successive investments in the teaching profession to get it to where it is now. And I think politicians actually have a tough time because it's unlikely they'll see the political benefits of their reforms while still in power and there is always a chance that their reforms might be overturned by successive governments. It's not easy.

YUE-YI

Definitely not. But thank you for those wise words to end on. Juliet, any last thought from you that you want to leave us with?

JULIET

I just wanted to end with a personal experience on that issue of reform. In Uganda, they introduced a reform about teaching in the local language. And it was just brought out hurriedly without the teachers giving any input. And, of course, it failed—until we had to come in as a teachers' union and convince the teachers to take it up.

So for any reform, any change in curriculum, any change in whatever that affects teaching and learning, the teachers should be at the forefront. They should be informed in good time. And they should be part of the process—in terms of designing, in terms of testing, in terms of implementation—if it's to be successful. That's it from my side.

BARBARA

I couldn't agree more.

See Saavedra, J., Alasuutari, H., & Gutierrez, M. (2018). 'Finland's education system: The journey to success.' *World Bank Blogs: Education for Global Development*. Retrieved from: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/finland-s-education-system-journey-success>.

CHAPTER 14

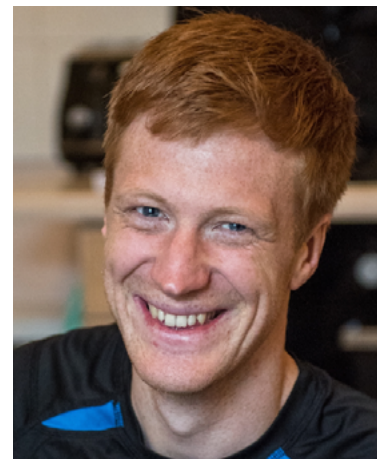
On habit formation, reference networks, and deliberate practice in the complex craft of teaching

Alice Cornish & Mike Hobbiss

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Mike Hobbiss is a teacher and cognitive neuroscience researcher, interested in the types of cognitive control required for educational success, specifically studying attention during the period of adolescence. His PhD work at University College London attempted to take what we know about attention from the laboratory and find out how well these ideas and techniques can help us to predict performance in the messier environment of a school. He is now back in the classroom, trying to put it all into practice!



This conversation took place on 11 January 2022.

YUE-YI

Can you tell us about a story, experience, or incident that illustrates how norms among teachers can affect behaviour or practice or outcomes in ways that might not have been anticipated by official rules, theoretical models, or other prior expectations?

MIKE

The question is looking for something slightly counterintuitive or something that you wouldn't necessarily have predicted, isn't it? So the first thing that came to mind is something that perhaps surprised me—having worked in both the independent [i.e., private] and state [i.e., public] education sectors in the UK, as well as internationally—which is the lack of autonomy that a lot of teachers have within state provision of schooling. And the parts that seems a bit counterintuitive is that this lack of autonomy is often accepted in a way that I don't think it would be many other jobs. There's a level of performance monitoring even in areas where you know that the performance monitoring is made-up nonsense, like when a senior leader will drop into your lesson for 10 minutes, twice a year, and give you a score out of 10 for how good you are—stuff that just doesn't stand up to a moment's scrutiny.

Yet we've come to rely on practices like this because, I suppose, it's so hard to quantify impact. As a teacher, you're doing such a complicated thing, so you can become reliant on these very basic crutches that don't actually have any validity. But they've become this sort of confidence trick or scaffold that a lot of teachers rely on. And is something that surprised me because, when you read the literature, autonomy is supposed to be one of these things that really contributes to job satisfaction, and a lack of it should be very harmful.

But there's actually been a bit of resistance when I've tried to suggest that we make changes in this area. Although the people doing the assessing have been resistant to that change, it's not only them. It's the people who are being assessed as well, who have come to rely on this assessment to tell them that they're doing a decent job. And that's surprised me. You know, often they are told they're doing a decent job because of all sorts of biases that have nothing to do with whether they are actually doing this job well or not. And I suppose the people who aren't told that they're doing a decent job probably dropped out of the profession quite quickly. So you end up with this sort of survivorship bias, where we all tell each other, "We're doing a reasonable job," but there's no real autonomy, and there's no ability to innovate or to actually do what we think is the right thing in a particular situation.

So I found that to be quite an interesting sort of norm. And it feeds into other areas—for example, even the question of a teacher leaving the school premises when you have a free period during the official workday, perhaps to get a coffee or something. And people would say, "Is that all right? Are you allowed to go out?" Or if I have a free period toward the end of the day and I want to go for a run around the school fields, and people say, — what possible reason could they have for stopping you from doing that? But there is a sort of resistance or hesitation.

I suppose, if I had to speculate, it's because teaching is so complicated and multifaceted, and there are so many strands to what you do that it can be impossible to do them all. Even if you get fantastic test results, are you meeting your pastoral responsibilities and fulfilling all of those other obligations? So we fall back on slightly

simplified models of what it is to do your job. And a lot of those come down to meeting overly simplified criteria in the way you teach your lessons. It comes down to being at your desk all the time and presenteeism and showing, by just sheer volume of hours you've been there, how much you care—because it's very difficult to show how you much care in a more meaningful other way. So maybe it's related to finding a way to easily demonstrate skills that actually are very difficult to quantify.

YUE-YI

Thanks so much for that. In some of the other interviews, we've had people talking about accountability structures that sacrifice complexity for certainty, but more so in the context of reliance on test scores. So it's great to have your example of reliance on monitoring the teachers themselves.

MIKE

I think you're right, and it's only been very recently that I've put those things together. I've realised that, actually, a fundamental thing about research is that you treat your numbers with an enormous amount of disdain, and that you are incredibly sceptical about the numbers until it's demonstrated otherwise. But that doesn't happen in schools, in my experience. I think far too much confidence is placed on the data you've collected, and it's not interrogated in any way. Far too much store is placed on that data without it being analysed. And all of these issues—teacher monitoring and teacher accountability, student accountability, poor assessment procedures for student learning—can be linked back to that, I think.

For another example of the interaction between standardised performance evaluations and multifaceted expectations of teachers, see interlocutor Soufia Siddiqi's observations in [Chapter 8](#). For related observations on unsustainably high expectations of teachers, see remarks from interlocutor Lucy Crehan in [Chapter 6](#).

The influence of teachers' reference networks on their instructional practice

YUE-YI

You've gotten us off to a very rich start, Mike. Alice, do you want to share a story?

ALICE

I don't know if I've got a specific story. But when I was thinking about your question, I was reflecting on the relationship between the teacher and the child in the classroom and what we can learn from behavioural sciences when considering how to improve the teaching of foundational learning at scale in low- and middle-income countries. One thing we're trying to unpack as part of a report we are currently preparing is the role of the teacher and how teacher behaviour and practice can lead to improved foundational learning outcomes. And in particular, for this question, I was thinking about how important it is to deeply understand who is important to teachers—who

The first report in this line of work by Alice and her colleagues is Noble, C., & Cornish, A. (2020). The science of learning: A summary of evidence about how children learn. Better Purpose. <https://www.betterpurpose.co/science-of-learning>.

is in their reference networks— when thinking about what might influence teachers’ practices.

It is important to consider the influence of the various people in the system who are in place to support and work with teachers. And it exposes some of the challenges in so many education systems where, perhaps, there are school leaders who are not pedagogical leaders, such that their role in the school is quite different from what we might expect the role of a school leader to be. So the teacher is lacking that reference network—especially when there is a similar lack of pedagogical leadership from actors at different levels of the system, such as district officials, coaches, et cetera, who have an influence on teachers’ instructional practice. Who those people are is so important, and so is their ability to be a role model and a reference group whom the teacher is going to respect and whose opinions matter to the teacher.

There are a couple of examples of this that we came across when we were putting together the report. For example, there is some research about a foundational literacy and numeracy programme that’s been very successful in The Gambia, where they put a huge amount of thought into identifying people within the community that would be the right people to work with teachers, support teachers, and deliver training. Actually finding people from within the community where the teachers are working is absolutely critical; people who understand the context and whom the teachers respect.

YUE-YI

Coincidentally, right before our conversation I was just reading Cristina Bicchieri’s *Norms in the wild*, where she talks a lot about how reference groups are so important in shaping decisions and norms. If you don’t mind, Alice, I would be curious to hear about your own experiences when you were a teacher. Who did you see as being in your reference group?

ALICE

Looking back to the time when I was teaching, a particular challenge I faced as a new teacher was with the school leadership. The school that I was working in was in a quite a difficult phase of its journey in terms of the leadership of the school, and I had somewhat lost confidence in the leadership and their commitment to supporting new teachers. There were a few incidents where I’d gone to the headteacher for some support, and I hadn’t gotten it. So that really broke down the relationship, and I didn’t feel that I was able to lean on the leadership for support. As a result, the people that I leaned on very much were peers who had been in the same sort of situation with the same challenges that I had in the classroom. So my reference network was very much the peer relationships that I sought out because of the kinds of shared experiences that I really valued.

See also remarks from interlocutor Luis Crouch in [Chapter 12](#) on the power of demonstration effects, remarks from Barbara Tournier in [Chapter 13](#) on the importance of instructional leadership, and the exchange between Katlego Sengadi and Lucy Crehan in [Chapter 6](#) on changing teachers’ beliefs by showing that change is possible in their classroom contexts.

Bicchieri, C. (2017). *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. Oxford University Press.

Another observation is that when I think about pedagogy, now I often draw on Twitter—which I didn’t at the time when I was teaching, because it just wasn’t such a big thing then. But I do reflect quite a lot about how my Twitter world is a reference network that I rely on quite a lot now, when I’m thinking about pedagogy. Which is quite interesting in its own right, when you think about the challenges of being in your social media bubble, and how that might be limiting the references that I draw from and are most influenced by.

YUE-YI

I suspect that a lot of these themes will come out in the larger project, related to the question of who and what is looked to and trusted as examples in the process of change.

ALICE

The trust piece, I think, is really interesting—and how much of an impact it can have on teachers when there’s a breakdown of trust.

YUE-YI

For sure. In the interests of time, I’m going to avoid getting us onto a tangent on trust. And we’ve talked quite a lot about the “*what*”, in terms of influential norms that shape teacher practice in the contexts you’re familiar with. But before we move on, any other prominent norms you’d like to get on the table, whether these are professional, organisational, or social norms that affect teachers?

MIKE

Just to follow up on what Alice said, it’s an interesting that until very recently, with the advent of things like Twitter, there hadn’t really been access to a pedagogical norm that was larger than what happened in the rest of your school. Your immediate colleagues provided pretty much the only model available to you. You also had some books on instructional topics, but you didn’t get much of a sense of what teachers were really doing beyond just the people around you. In the UK, I suppose the Chartered College of Teaching does, in theory, provide teachers with different models of practice, but I’m not convinced it does—and I’d expect that in many of the countries you’re studying, there is even more of an issue of models of practice being absent or limited.

YUE-YI

I’d agree, and I think a parallel in international development beyond education would be see how the advent of TVs coming into villages has changed ideas about gender norms in some countries.

For a review of research on teachers’ use of Facebook and Twitter, see Kelly, N., Mercieca, B., & Mercieca, P. (2021). Studying teachers in social network sites: A review of methods. *Review of Education*, 9(3), e3272. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3272>.

See <https://chartered.college/aboutus/>.

For a related observation on the power of exposure to different purposes and cultures in education, see remarks from interlocutor Wendy Kopp in [Chapter 5](#).

MIKE

Mm hmm.

YUE-YI

Alice, any follow-up thoughts or other influential norms that you want to mention?

Why classroom teachers often practice habitual patterns of behaviour

ALICE

I was just thinking about structured pedagogy programmes, and the need for teachers to be able to use the teachers' guides in these programmes in the way that it was intended, with fidelity to the design principles of the teacher's guide. Teachers' guides can establish certain behaviours, automating certain classroom processes and establishing teaching habits in the classroom.

There was an example that I saw from Justice Rising in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where they're developing chalkboard guides, in which they essentially provide a model of how you use the chalkboard as a teacher. They had observed lessons for a long period of time and realised that, in the DRC, teachers are very reliant on the chalkboard as a mode of teaching. And so they were harnessing that societal norm of using the chalkboard, and through the teacher's guide they were trying to build certain habits about how you can give explanations and how you can use the chalkboard to apply principles of dual coding by accompanying what you're writing on the chalkboard with a really great spoken explanation.

So I think there's something to be learned there about the use of teacher's guides. First of all, they can leverage norms within a society, which can then maximise their impact. Also, teachers see that other teachers are using those guides, and using them consistently—and that the practices in the guides fall within the acceptable teaching repertoire in order to make them more socially acceptable. There are lots of examples and lots of research on teacher guides and how they can be used effectively, but this just came to mind.

YUE-YI

That's a convenient segue for us into the question of “*why*” certain norms emerge and remain durable, because implicit in what you were talking about were some related factors—like the reference network element, and also the fact that new norms are more likely to stick if they aren't too far from existing norms.

See <https://www.justicerising.org/chalkboard-guides>.

For an example of research on teacher guides, see Piper, B., Sitabkhan, Y., Mejia, J., & Betts, K. (2018). *Effectiveness of Teachers' Guides in the Global South: Scripting, Learning Outcomes, and Classroom Utilization*. RTI Press. <https://doi.org/10.3768/rtipress.2018.op.0053.1805>.

In continuing to explore the “*why*” questions, I wanted to prompt you, Mike, to talk about what you’ve written on typical working conditions for teachers that are particularly conducive to the emergence of habit-oriented behaviour. It seems to me, at least, that this is closely related to why norms emerge.

MIKE

Absolutely. A lot of what is normal in the classroom is probably a reversion to automatic behaviour and norms that we’ve internalised over a long period of time. It probably started when we were at school ourselves, so we have taken in all those models and norms already even before we start teaching. Actually, one of the challenges of doing that piece of research was trying to find teacher practices that we could study and that, in theory, wouldn’t be affected by previous instances of schooling.

In this research, one major part of habit formation and production is repetition of behaviour. Teachers are doing pretty much the same thing—with small tweaks—in several lessons a day. And within that, they will be asking, over the course of a year, tens of thousands of individual questions and dealing with tens of thousands of student behaviour issues, even if in a very low-level way. So there’s an enormous amount of repetition, which is conducive to developing strong habits. And if your model of practice is built on your own experiences, including your previous experiences of schooling, it’s actually very easy to revert to practices that may have long since been deemed ineffective or even inappropriate. They can be very deeply rooted, sometimes.

Stressful situations are also likely to facilitate both the development and then the production of habitual behaviour. So you learn habits more quickly in stressful environments, and then you also produce them more readily under stress. And certainly in research in Western countries, teaching often comes out towards the top in self-reports of stress ratings for different professions. You may know better than me whether that is a trend worldwide, but I’d imagine it probably is.

YUE-YI

I don’t actually know offhand, but now I’m curious.

MIKE

At least in the UK, you don’t meet many calm teachers! More seriously, stress is certainly a factor affecting habit formation and production in teachers. Time pressure and performance pressure is another one. Whenever I talk about performance pressure, I explain the concept by describing how they actually create situations with performance pressure in laboratory tasks. And all they do is that they give people a task to do, then give them a second task while demanding that they still perform the first task to the same standard—which gets a chuckle from most teachers, because that situation seems immediately familiar. The related concept of time pressure is just

Hobbiss, M., Sims, S., & Allen, R. (2021). Habit formation limits growth in teacher effectiveness: A review of converging evidence from neuroscience and social science. *Review of Education*, 9(1), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3226>.

the situation when the number of things you have to do in the day never quite seems to match up to the number of hours available.

So those are the major factors associated with falling back on habitual patterns of behaviour—and all of those would appear to be present in schools. I suppose the question, then, is where those factors come from in the first place. We’ve touched on that a bit already, but in talking through these observations I find myself wondering about that historical connection back to, perhaps, our own experiences of schooling and then our teachers’ experiences of their schooling. It would be interesting how these things actually might persist through the generations because we all internalise these models that become quite difficult to break.

YUE-YI

Like internalised notions of whether or not it’s okay for an adult to go out and get a coffee when they’re free at work, as you mentioned at the start.

MIKE

Yes, quite. Although, interestingly, that specific norm about presenteeism doesn’t fit with my understanding of how education here might have been, say, 50 years ago. This is anecdotal, but I don’t have the impression that teachers had that same level of feeling chained to their desk, or of the accountability procedures being quite so sort of onerous as they are now. So I wonder whether that is one area where norms have changed. And I’m not quite sure why that changed or where that change has come from, unless it’s just an attempt, as we said, to simplify the complexity.

But going back to the research, certainly with pedagogical behaviours—you know, getting students just to copy things off a board because it feels like everybody’s doing something, which in turn seems good because it becomes a proxy for active engagement; or checking for students’ understanding by just saying, “Everyone get that?”—these sorts of habits often come very naturally to teachers, maybe because that was how we experienced it as students, or just because it seems a very natural way to communicate. These habits are very hard to shift even when we actually know that they’re probably not very effective.

A question about teacher gender and behaviour

ALICE

Can I ask a question to Mike?

YUE-YI

Please do.

ALICE

So, one thing that we have really struggled to understand in any depth is the role that gender might play in habits, norms, or behaviour in general. When we were breaking down this challenge around whether behavioural sciences can help us to understand low learning levels in foundational literacy and numeracy, we looked at the integrative model of behavioural prediction. This model includes the intent to act, knowledge, skills, and environment as drivers of behaviour, and then it unpacks intent to act as the piece that is perhaps less well understood and is so often left out of teacher development programmes. The model also talks about other factors, such as gender and culture, personal traits, exposure to media, and so on. But I've struggled to find much in the research that goes into any of that in more detail. There are some bits of research on various teacher gender biases towards student outcomes or allocation of class activities and things like that, but less on the role that a teacher's gender might have on their behaviour. And I just wondered if that's something that you'd come across?

For the integrative model of behavioural prediction, see Fishbein, M., & Yzer, M. C. (2003). Using Theory to Design Effective Health Behavior Interventions. *Communication Theory*, 13(2), 164–183. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2003.tb00287.x>.

MIKE

Off the top of my head, I can't think of anything I've ever read that's actually gone into that area. Which is not to say it wouldn't be out there. As you both know, a lot of the research that's really conducted within the classroom is often either pretty ropey, or it's from a fairly long time ago and for whatever reason just hasn't been followed up. I do remember reading this fascinating study that was from the 1970s about how teachers didn't respond to feedback properly—and it had been cited only once, and no one had ever really engaged with this study since. But as I recall, there was no mention of teacher gender in that paper, I'm afraid. Sorry.

ALICE

No, that's fine. I thought I'd ask just in case I was missing something.

YUE-YI

One related point that has come up in some of these interviews—although this is very far removed from the neuroscience and the psychology of it, and relates more to social structures—is that in certain contexts, the decision to choose teaching as a profession can be gendered. For example, the men might see it as a stepping stone to a better job. But for women, a civil-service teaching job might be a socially acceptable kind of role to have if you're of a certain social class and you want to work while still maintaining an acceptably domestic image. But the caveat is that this is highly context dependent.

For more how the teaching profession fits into gendered social structures, see the interview with interlocutors Yamini Aiyar and Soufia Siddiqi in [Chapter 8](#).

Let's shift to the “*how*” question, which is about how we can change teacher norms. The focus here is on approaches for shifting or reorienting teacher norms for improvement. That said, given that we've also talked about teacher autonomy and intent to act, another aspect you might want to explore is the question of which actors have or should have the authority or agency to try and change teacher norms at all. Any thoughts about either the approaches or the ownership and agency part?

Individual teacher agency amid systemic structures and collective networks

MIKE

You're right, it's a really difficult balancing act. Dylan Wiliam uses the expression tight-loose, which is about holding people tightly to particular standards of trying to get better, but being relatively loose within that about what they are choosing to focus on as an individual.

Obviously, my reflections here come from working in the UK system, where teaching is a graduate profession and where most people, I think, certainly deserve more freedom than they've perhaps been given. Whether that's always the case in all systems is not for me to comment. But from my perspective, in the same way that trainee teachers are always told never to punish the whole class for the actions of a few, so you shouldn't have an entire school accountability system based on the idea that one or two people might not engage properly with their work. And so the managerial norm has to be one of trust—to get back to the point about trust that we were discussing earlier. You have to trust that the norm for most teachers is that they actually do want to do their job well, and they want to improve, and they want the best outcomes for the people that they're teaching. I think that's true in the vast majority of cases.

So that's the sort of shift, toward providing that ownership to the individuals themselves, that I think would work—perhaps alongside having a system where at least you are able to check that they're doing something oriented to improvement. Maybe you have a system that actually provide the times for that professional development. And maybe you provide a framework for how they could do deliberate practice of whatever skill it is that they've decided to focus on, like a framework for working in small groups or something similar, to increase that peer accountability. But after you provide that time and that framework, then you let them take the lead on it. I think something like that is probably a more powerful model than many current approaches to PD.

See Thompson, M., & Wiliam, D. (2007, April). Tight but Loose: A Conceptual Framework for Scaling Up School Reforms. Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Chicago. https://www.dylanwiliam.org/Dylan_Wiliams_website/Papers_files/Tight%20but%20Loose%20AERA%2007.doc.

For a related observation on the negative effects of systems that focus on minimising the damage of the worst actor, see interlocutor Dan Honig's remarks in [Chapter 4](#).

The concept of deliberate practice—effortful, structured, repeated, feedback-based practice of challenging but attainable tasks within a broader body of expertise—was developed by K. Anders Ericsson. Some elements of the research on deliberate practice were later popularised as the “10,000 hour rule” in Malcolm Gladwell's (2008) *Outliers: The story of success*. See Ericsson, K. A., Krampe, R. T., & Tesch-Römer, C. (1993). The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance. *Psychological Review*, 100(3), 363–406. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.100.3.363>.

ALICE

Yes, and I think that there's a lot of value in recognising teachers may subconsciously or automatically "decide" which social group or reference networks they belong to. We found some evidence that schools that establish their own norms have a strong influence on teaching practice. These were schools which had very established norms across the school—for example, consistent routines used across the school linked to school values, et cetera—and which became a community that the teacher identifies as being part of.

But it doesn't necessarily have to be the school that the teacher belongs to—you can see the same principle at work in other communities, like if the teacher is part of a training intervention or some other form of community of practice. In my experience at the Varkey Foundation, we found that people strongly identified with being part of the Global Teacher Prize Ambassador community, which really took off as a community of practice. They often felt that they had more in common with the global community of teachers than, perhaps, teachers from their school or local community and, as a result, their practice was shaped and influenced by their Ambassador peers.

So it's about understanding and tapping into the social groups that teachers most identify with, whether that's the school or some other unit, and being able to harness the chosen sense of identity to understand teacher norms across that group.

For a different example of teachers who choose to identify with norms that diverge from their immediate school environments, see [Chapter 9](#) for interlocutor Masooda Bano's opening example of highly motivated teachers in ineffective state schools in Pakistan.

The neuroscience of habitual behaviour, the importance of deliberate practice in professional development, and the context-specificity of teacher motivation

YUE-YI

Thanks, Alice. As you respond to that, Mike, can I prompt you to also tell us a bit about your work on—I might use the wrong terms here—the neural circuits of habit formation versus behaviour change?

MIKE

Sure. I really agree with Alice. It's really interesting to hear that perspective, because you do see schools that have formed what seems to be, at least from the outside, this very cohesive kind of approach to what they want to be and what their teaching and learning philosophy is. And they've developed this shared language about what they value and practice—which is something that helps this norm formation, isn't it? If you all use the same term for the same thing, then then immediately you've got a level of cohesion. I think that is a really important first step. And then if you really want to shift

from the intent to change to actual change, the other thing that you have to provide is structures that actually allow people to deliberately practice whatever the change in behaviour is.

The point about neural circuits is basically that there are separate neural circuits which govern goal-directed behaviour and habitual behaviour. Goal-directed behaviour is non-habitual behaviour that we do because we want to achieve a certain outcome. In contrast, habitual behaviour is outcome-insensitive; we do it in response to the stimulus rather than to the consequence of the behaviour, and we just perform it automatically. And you can see that these types of behaviour play off against each other. As you're learning a new skill, that goal-directed brain circuit is very active. And then gradually that declines, and the habitual brain circuit takes over—and that's essential for performing certain tasks automatically and for stopping us from getting overwhelmed; it's a very useful function. But it also means that we then produce this behaviour reflexively in response to whatever environment we find ourselves in.

An implication of this is that because we're actually dealing with two completely different brain circuits, it's not a case of just shifting the dial back the other way, in terms of, "Well, actually, I think I should do something different." Because this is outcome-insensitive, the behaviour is performed regardless of your intention to change and even regardless of the negative things that happened the last time you shouted at a student or whatever it is. So that helps to explain why all these studies find that goal and intention change is not enough to cause changes in actual behaviour. What you need are environmental changes at the same time as the change in goal and intention.

And yet the dominant model of trying to change teacher behaviour is assuming that they're motivated to want to change, providing them with information, and then assuming that this will be enough. So there are a lot of sort of assumptions there, and all you ever get to is at most an intention change rather than a behavioural change. Until quite recently, very few methods of teacher professional development involved any kind of behavioural aspect, or any sort of deliberate practice of what the behaviour we're trying to cultivate.

However, coaching, which has become very popular in the last few years, is one of the approaches that does incorporate a behavioural aspect. And evidence seems to suggest that these behavioural and deliberate practice elements might be the reason why coaching is more effectively leading to changes in teacher behaviour. I mean, it might just be that coaching is a much more intensive mechanism of PD than the typical mechanism, but it does seem well-placed to address those problems that are caused by teachers' habitual behaviour, so it fits quite nicely with what we know about the neuroscience of habit. So: providing the chance for people to practice whatever the behaviour is in as a realistic environment as possible; doing it numerous times, ideally under a bit of pressure, maybe with someone watching you—in other words, to replace an old behaviour by forming a new habit in exactly the way that you would form a habit otherwise.

Hobbiss, M., Sims, S., & Allen, R. (2021). Habit formation limits growth in teacher effectiveness: A review of converging evidence from neuroscience and social science. *Review of Education*, 9(1), 3–23.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3226>

For more on coaching as a form of in-service teacher professional development, see remarks from interlocutor David Evans in [Chapter 11](#).

Mike explains these ideas in more detail in a blog here: <https://hobbolog.wordpress.com/2021/10/19/old-habits-die-hard-my-researched-surrey-2021-presentation/>.

ALICE

One thing I'm hearing there is that with instructional coaching and other professional development models, in order to tap into that understanding of habit building, it's so critical to be very granular about what we mean by what good instruction looks like. So often, professional development is just not granular in any way. Instead, it's so abstract. And the contrast really stands out from just listening to you speaking about coaching and thinking about some of the instructional coaching models that I've seen recently. There was a model that I was looking at in England—a high-income context, where teaching is graduate profession, et cetera—and the coaching feedback was so granular, with a breaking down of instructional approaches into actions that were so, so specific. And I think often in low- and middle-income contexts, we're very far from that.

MIKE

I think that's a really good point. Because it seems almost counterintuitive, doesn't it? If you want big improvements, it might seem very strange to focus on the wording of the instructions you give in your starter activity in a lesson, or whatever it might be. But actually, maybe that's all that we can cope with in terms of changing behaviours in a challenging situation. And until that new behaviour is securely incorporated, there's no point in going on to change anything else.

YUE-YI

When I was teaching in Malaysia, I once got feedback on a lesson that was like, "More children need to meet the lesson objective." Well, what do you want me to do with that? What does that even mean in practice?

In the last few minutes, do either of you have any last thoughts that you'd like to leave us with?

ALICE

For me, this conversation has been really helpful in my learning as well. You've captured it really well, Mike—the interplay between environment, knowledge, skills, intent to action, and how all of those things influence each other and lead to behaviour in ways that are still not very well understood. And when thinking about theories of change for how you can get to improvements in teacher practice, the knowledge and skills element is still the main focus of professional development. Intent to act—and the whole area of motivation—is less often the focus, but perhaps it's started to be addressed inadvertently through various experiences in professional development.

But the environment, and the sort of influence the environment has on motivation, varies so significantly when looking at different contexts. It can be really difficult to unpack. For example, the impact that class size might have on motivation might

be very different in the USA versus Malaysia versus the DRC. All of those enabling environmental conditions and the disproportionate impact that they have on motivation or on intent to act is quite complex to understand. A given environmental condition might prevent you from taking action in one context but have a much lesser influence in another. So that's just something else that we're grappling with, and it would be interesting to learn more from different contexts.

CHAPTER 15

On teacher standards, public recognition, professional incentives, and varied (and changing) expectations

Laura Savage & Carlos Vargas Tamez

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This conversation took place on 17 January 2022.

YUE-YI

To kick us off, can you share a story, experience, or incident that, in your view, illustrates how norms among teachers can affect their behaviour or their practice or

outcomes in ways that might not have been anticipated by official rules, economic models, or prior expectations?

LAURA

I tried to think of a single example that demonstrated an awful lot of different norms and failed to think of a specific one. But I can think of lots of different experiences that I've had in different places that demonstrate the diversity and unpredictability of expectations placed on teachers—and there were some that really stand out as surprising.

One experience is from the time when I was working in Bangladesh, and there was an effort to roll out a programme based on TaRL. We, as the donors, had recommended it; the government had gone along with it as part of a results-based financing loan. It was one of nine different streams of work to try out in an initial 300 schools—and then it was an utter failure. It made absolutely no progress whatsoever. There was no data analysis behind the programme, so we were picking our brains to try and work out why it had failed.

A lot of it came down to expectations from both teachers and parents about the style of teaching. This was in a context where BRAC has been an incredibly successful NGO, so we thought that people might understand this new programme because it was similar to the kinds of approaches that BRAC were taking in the early years. But what we hadn't quite appreciated—although note that this is not substantiated with systematic data—is that the expectation was that once a child had graduated out of a BRAC accelerated learning programme or early childhood programme, then they would go to school and learn “properly”. And the idea that teachers might break children into groups with different ability levels or not pursue rote learning to the test was just unacceptable—firstly to teachers, who were worried that these incredibly new expectations were going entirely against everything that they had been given to believe was the approach that you should take to teaching. And it was unacceptable to parents, who were saying, “We're not going to get anything out of this programme, because you're not teaching our children properly.”

That, for me, was a very big learning experience about the kinds of policies and processes and projects that have been designed in ways that just don't appreciate the very basic need to engage with existing behaviours and existing expectations.

The other example I wanted to mention is almost confounding in another way. Maybe this doesn't have as much to do with teacher norms as with government norms, but it's the teacher licencing effort in Ethiopia, which I learned about through conversations with the RISE Ethiopia team and with the people who were involved in technical assistance to the government at the time. This, for me, is a fascinating effort by the government of Ethiopia to set standards for teachers. To caveat, I'm a political ethnographer, so I'm constantly looking for deep observed behaviours and

TaRL, or Teaching at the Right Level, is a model for helping children in the middle primary years to rapidly develop foundational literacy and numeracy. For an interview with interlocutor Katlego Sengadi, the North East Regional Coordinator for TaRL in Botswana, see [Chapter 6](#).

interpretations, but I'm in no way close to this example and this is all anecdotal. But my understanding is that the government of Ethiopia kept the bar high. And I think if I were a teacher in that system—or indeed, in many other systems around the world where teacher licencing has been rolled out—there's an expectation that if you apply for the license, you will get it. Because a government is not going to want to annoy its teacher workforce by saying, “No, you're not actually good enough to get this licence. Go away, do better.” And yet that's exactly what they did. At least the first year, they said something like, “Out of 20,000 teachers who have applied for this license, we're going allow just this microscopic group to pass.” And I just think that was incredible, and I really want to know more about what happened in that context.

CARLOS

I can jump in with a similar example. I was trying to think of one that will illustrate how there might be unwritten rules and norms that relate to expectations on the teaching profession, and particularly to why a student leaving high school may want to enter the teaching profession. There is an interesting example in Chile, where there is an organisation that's called *Elige Educar*, which translates as “choose to teach”—you might be familiar with them. Basically, the work of *Elige Educar* has to do with elevating the status of the profession socially, or the esteem in which teachers are held. And this is emphasised together with reviewing what are some of the working conditions teachers face, what are some of the expectations that are placed on teachers, and so on.

From this exercise of making teacher careers more attractive, they started working with the Ministry of Education and actually helped to develop a set of professional teaching standards. When I moved to Santiago, Chile had already produced these professional teaching standards for K–12 education, and they were beginning to work on professional standards for early childhood care and education. And so I saw how that process helped in terms of the esteem that teachers are held in, and in helping to reconsider and debunk a couple of problems facing early childhood care and education. One of them has to do with the feminisation of the profession—so there is a need to try to disentangle this idea of care and education being a feminine profession, and this cultural stereotype of women being more apt for such an undertaking. So developing these standards was, I think, an interesting way of shaking the tree of saying, firstly, that it is *not* a feminine profession.

Secondly, another issue that this process tried to challenge was the idea that care is less important than education, and that care is not constrained to early years. So there was the argument that caring and care goes beyond how it is usually understood, like taking care of a person in early childhood. Instead, care should be understood more as an ethic of care—because the ontology of education is also an act of caring for one another, and the outcome of education is that our societies and individuals actually care for one another, for the environment, and so on and so forth.

For a one perspective on teacher licensing in Ethiopia, a performance review of the larger education reform package that included the launch of the teacher licensing scheme stated that: “Out of the total examinees, 24 percent (101,596) qualified for portfolio assessment. Of this, 31,000 received licensing certificates, while the remaining are under assessment. One of the key challenges is the lack of incentives for teachers and school leaders to undergo licensing tests since there is no link between the licensing results and their career development” (World Bank, 2020, p. 52). World Bank. (2020). Ethiopia - Second General Education Quality Improvement Project (English). World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/141401597014133031/Ethiopia-Second-General-Education-Quality-Improvement-Project>.

For more on the teaching profession in Ethiopia, see remarks from interlocutor Belay Hagos Hailu in [Chapter 7](#).

It was a very interesting example because it didn't just develop an idea of what a teacher is or should be—of course, a standard always does that—but it brought this idea together with an understanding that these expectations that society has placed on teachers imply that their working conditions, their selection and recruitment processes, their remuneration, and their career pathways have to be improved. And this worked partly because Elige Educar is very good at communications. So before these standards reached the parliament for approval, they campaigned heavily. And I think it was that social understanding—that process of revisiting the role of the teachers, the esteem in which they are held, the social construction of who teachers are and should be—that really changed the norms or rules as to how you actually recruit and train teachers, which was then institutionalised in the form of professional standards.

For an interview with interlocutor Verónica Cabezas, education economist and president of the board of Elige Educar, see [Chapter 2](#).

Multiple expectations of teachers, and how the COVID pandemic may have changed them

LAURA

I wonder whether some of these expectations and assumptions about teachers will change after these two years that we've been through, when so many parents now have tried to teach at home and to be a collaborator with the teacher. For example, take the question of learning loss. It's a topic that a relatively small group has been trying to raise within the global education agenda for a while, and advocacy on this topic had felt like pushing a ball up a hill—but now it's become something that a lot of people will nod at when you bring it up, because they're worried about their own children having lost learning during school closures over the last couple of years.

And I wonder if the questions and expectations around teachers will change going forward because there is this appreciation that teachers are not just knowledge sharers, but rather they are carers in all sorts of ways, as you said. Over the coming years, as we fulfil this mantra of “building back better”, then it's possible that the expectations on teachers are going to grow and grow—because of concerns about mental health and expectations about what we should all be getting out of education. I think a major lesson from the pandemic is that the experience of education is about far more than the knowledge. It is about your cohort; it's about the relationships; it's about the socioemotional learning—and it feels like all of this has been brought into stark focus for everyone over the last couple of years. Maybe this focus will help to further the debate and advance the conversation a little bit, as one of the few silver linings of these two years.

For a related observation, see [Chapter 8](#) for interlocutor Yamini Aiyar's remarks on teachers providing emotional and psychological support for children from impoverished backgrounds.

CARLOS

Yes, I agree. And there are two related points here. On the one hand, because of the pandemic, and because of the virtualisation of education, I do see a renewed appreciation for teachers and their work—precisely because parents had to take care of teaching without any clue as to how to do it, or just dealing with their children all together for eight hours or more in a day. I think parents were like, “Thank God for teachers and schools!”

On the other hand, there’s this issue that you mentioned, Laura, about education being broader than the prescribed curriculum. It is broader than the textbook and the exercises and the homework. Also, when schooling entered the households, it made a difference to how we think of education as more of a collective endeavour. That is something that many of us have always preached and argued for: that education is more than schooling, that there’s a role to play for all stakeholders, including parents, society, and other learning spaces. But it only became forcefully true because of the pandemic.

And that is when it becomes clear that people should be educated on other things besides the science, besides the mathematics, besides the reading, and so on. During the pandemic, we have seen not only a concern for the emotional dimension and for wellbeing of the child at the individual level, but also a recognition that the collective level matters a lot in education. This recognition of the collective level was visible in, for example, the issue of socialisation and the question of what is lost when children have not been able to experience and experiment and share with classmates. It has also been harder for teachers themselves to share experiences with colleagues, and so on. This other dimension of education has always been there, but it was probably underplayed before the pandemic made it prominent again. And the fact that education is not only about academics, but also about the social aspects and for the formation of identities, is something that everybody realised when learners had to stay home.

LAURA

But I do worry that in some of the contexts that we work with, that’s just going to pile on more and more and more expectation on teachers. The reality check that I always go back to is the SDI data, which says that in the eight countries that were in that initial SDI survey, 20-plus percent of teachers are absent from school on a given day and then another 40 percent who are in school are absent from the classroom.

And we need to dig down into the reasons for this. I worked with UNICEF in Innocenti on their systems analysis of what underpinned that teacher absenteeism. I think there’s a 100-page report on every single country that they looked at. Maybe this is already jumping ahead to the “why” and “how” questions, but there are some obvious reasons for this absenteeism. A big one is that teachers are asked to go and work as election officials, or they’ve got administrative duties that are outside the school. They’re being asked by government officials to basically go and do a list of ten

For observations on some effects of the COVID-10 pandemic on mindsets in public management, see remarks from interlocutor Margarita Gómez in [Chapter 5](#).

Data from the Service Delivery Indicators (SDI) on education for Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo, and Uganda can be accessed at <https://www.sdindicators.org/indicators>.

See <https://www.unicef-irc.org/research/time-to-teach/>.

other things. And that is part of the expectation about what their job involves—so the absenteeism is part of it; the absenteeism is rational and justified.

Given all of this, I do worry slightly that there is now going to be this additional layer of expectations about the social aspects of education on top of all of the pre-existing expectations. It's easy to add to the teacher blame game. It's already easy enough to look at things like the SDI data and say, "Well, it's the teacher's fault for being out of the classroom. And since they've been through teacher training, it's the teacher's fault for not knowing the content that they should be teaching to 10-year-olds." But what we need is instead to understand the deeper reasons as to why we got to this point, and what we can do to then shift the next cohorts away from being part of that pattern.

For a related perspective, see remarks from interlocutor Shwetlena Sabarwal in [Chapter 3](#). See also [Chapter 9](#) for interlocutor Masooda Bano's observations on "anti-work" culture in some schools in Pakistan.

Tensions between formal structures of accountability and holistic ideals of teaching

YUE-YI

Absolutely. Before we get fully into the "why" and the "how" questions, is there anything else you'd like to get on the table for the "what" question of the most influential norms that shape teacher practice, whether organisational, social, or professional norms?

CARLOS

It's difficult to separate the "what" from the other questions, but if you look at it from an educational administration or system perspective, there are a number of rules that aim to prescribe what teachers do and what teachers are—and I think this has actually been detrimental to a more collective formation of rules by practitioners themselves. These sets of administrative rules are usually specified in things like policy directives or curriculum prescriptions. And there are also a number of accountability technologies that have been put in place to shape, monitor, and enforce these rules, like inspection, teacher evaluation and appraisal, standardised testing, and so on.

But these administrative rules and accountability technologies clash a little bit with the more moral and social mandate and understanding of what teachers should be. There's actually a contradiction: we want teachers to be more autonomous, creative, and active when at the same time we're curtailing all of this space for autonomy, creativity, and innovation by mandating what they do and monitoring and enforcing it closely. So we have, on the one hand, the education system's rules and understanding of what teachers have to do that is in contradiction with, on the other hand, these social rules and understanding of what teachers should do. The accountability technologies would probably clash with what is expected socially of teachers—and, actually, on the

For a related observation on how regimented preservice teacher education can be in tension with expectations that teachers act autonomously and creatively, see interlocutor Kwame Akyeampong's remarks in [Chapter 12](#).

“imaginary” of teachers. In contrast to the positive constructions of what we imagine teachers to be, the way we organise educational systems might actually speak of a different profile of a teacher who cannot or would not work independently, or decide on curriculum or evaluation by themselves, or develop safety protocols. As we’ve seen with COVID protocols, there is so little participation from teachers, in terms of social dialogue, into how school closures and shifts are implemented even though this affects teachers’ own working conditions so much.

YUE-YI

One thought that’s related to observations you’ve both made is that there is a real challenge from the hierarchy of influence and power between these different sources of rules, right? The formal accountability technologies often garner the most attention, but they don’t give enough recognition to a lot of the social and relational aspects of teachers’ work. I guess that’s also related to how care labour is generally under-recognised. A friend of mine who’s a nurse recently said, “You know, out of all the times that people have thanked me, they never thank me for following the right procedure. They thank me for my kindness.” And yet kindness is not part of her official job description.

But, on the other hand, if we incorporate things like kindness and an ethic of care into formal rules for teachers, then we run the risk of over-codifying them in a way that flattens a lot of the relational aspects, which would further curtail their autonomy. So I don’t know how to square the circle on this.

CARLOS

I think part of the answer has to do, again, with a further process of reflection that we need to have socially about how society backs teachers up. That is to say, we need to stop thinking that “teachers are the only educators, and that’s it.” There’s a role to be played by society, by households, by communities—and they all have to match those aspirations for children, in terms of, for example, the values that are lived out daily, in terms of the social norms that are observed and/or contested.

When we are talking about the social and emotional dimensions of children’s education, it is important that teachers bring good educational practices to contribute to these dimensions. But it is also important to say that they are not only ones to play a part in this. And, hence, a way of alleviating that burden that comes from saying, “All of responsibility falls on the teacher,” is to instead say that there are many things that we need to do together and that education goes beyond schooling.

YUE-YI

That makes a lot of sense. Anything to add, Laura?

For one conceptualisation of the term “imaginary” as used by sociologists, see Taylor (2004): “There are important differences between social imaginary and social theory. I adopt the term imaginary (i) because my focus is on the way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends. It is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (p. 23). Taylor, C. (2004). *Modern social imaginaries*. Duke University Press.

Varied motivations, varied stakeholder expectations, and the importance of teacher voice

LAURA

I have two other reflections to put on the table as to the “*what*” and “*why*” of the norms and expectations that get set around teachers. One is that there’s been some really interesting work and incredible efforts to understand the incentives and motivations of teachers both at different points in their careers. One point is at the outset of a teacher’s career—and these incentives and motivations are so different in different contexts, right? Being a teacher might be seen as a job that might not be paid very well but is nonetheless prestigious, or it might be seen as the last resort when there’s nothing better to do. There are so many different incentives as to why teachers go into the profession. And I’d be fascinated to know more about any contexts in the world where motivations for starting a teaching career is explicitly built into teacher recruitment policy—I don’t know a huge amount about this area, but I think it’s so important in setting expectations and also in understanding the expectations and the behavioural norms that teachers bring with them into the profession. And beyond the start of the career, there are lots of organisations, including some in the RISE Community of Practice, that have been doing really interesting things either around mapping the collaborative professional networks that teachers have, or in building meaningful incentives and supporting those motivations in the face of the more stringent accountability mechanisms that can dampen some of that initial incentive to get involved in teaching.

The other reflection—and this came to mind when I was thinking about what you were saying about enabling the autonomy of teachers—is that I know from engagement with the Department for Education in England that flip-flopping between different policies is almost the worst thing you can do for teacher autonomy. Because flip-flopping means that you give autonomy in one round of changes and say, “Make up your own curriculum. Carry on, you’ve got lots and lots of freedom, and this is the way we’re going forward”. Then five years later, you come back and you do exactly the opposite. And it’s incredibly difficult over the course of a teacher’s career to keep up with these changing expectations.

If we see a classroom as a system, then the teacher is looking at expectations from the students in front of them, from themselves, from the teacher’s own family—but beyond the classroom there are expectations from the students’ parents, district officials, and central government officials, who are all placing what are often competing expectations on them. When there are yet more expectations from government policy or, indeed, from projects that external actors come in and fund, all of which affect this same classroom, which just exacerbates the number of different expectations that one individual teacher has to deal with. And when that individual is dealing with demands

See <https://riseprogramme.org/rise-community-of-practice>.

For examples of how novice teachers’ initial motivations can be dampened by accountability mechanisms, see remarks from interlocutors Katlego Sengadi in [Chapter 6](#), Juliet Wajega in [Chapter 13](#), and Shintia Revina in [Chapter 7](#).

that that they go off and do a hundred things in a day, and they've got a hundred kids in their classroom, and they don't have electricity, then it's just more and more layers of unrealistic stuff.

If we then circle back to that question of incentives, there has been one thing that I've seen in all the school visits I've done over the years—all of which I've loved, and all of which have made me feel uncomfortable. It's the ongoing willingness of teachers to teach and their love of the profession, such that in the face of all of these challenges, they keep going, and they keep turning up, and they keep doing what they do. And I think that is so powerful, and maybe something that we don't think about enough in some of the more hardcore research questions because it's perhaps seen as too soft.

CARLOS

That's true, Laura, about the love of the profession and the multiple expectations. And I think that the vision we sometimes hear of the teacher as a superhero is pretty detrimental to the profession because it plays into this theme of too many expectations as well.

I was just thinking that even with these more tacit norms, we can actually see them made a bit more visible if you look at the teacher prizes, like the Global Teacher Prize or the UNESCO Hamdan Prize for Teacher Development or the prizes for innovation. There are all sorts of prizes, and we can look at them and see what the jurors are taking into consideration to award a teacher prize. During the couple of times in which I have participated as a jury member for these prizes, I think we're seeing a shift from this superhero vision and into more nuanced perspectives of teachers' norms and responsibilities. There's a recognition of the fact that what teachers do is coupled with systemic enabling conditions, like the physical conditions of schools themselves and other realities of the contexts in which they work. But it does boil down to how they make do with what is available to them.

What Laura just said is true: the willingness to teach can be present regardless of the conditions teachers face. But I think it is also very, very important for the expectations of teachers to be coupled with the actual conditions in which teachers work. And that has to do with the material conditions of the schools, but it also has to do with other aspects of their working conditions, like the kinds of professional development they receive and the possibilities for collegial exchange and working together within the profession.

The process of building up the profession has to belong to teachers themselves, through their participation, so that they can either adopt or adapt these social constructions that are placed on teachers—or speak back in response to the expectations and say, “This is what is really possible, and this is what isn't possible.” They need to have a voice, but sometimes there are no appropriate channels for capturing that voice and for teachers to participate more fully. And, once again, this

For related observations on unrealistic expectations placed on teachers, see remarks from interlocutors Soufia Siddiqi in [Chapter 8](#), Mike Hobbiss in [Chapter 14](#), and Verónica Cabezas and Jessica Holloway in [Chapter 2](#).

See <https://www.globalteacherprize.org/> and <https://www.unesco.org/en/prizes/teacher-development>.

For a related perspective on the importance of teacher voice, see the interview with interlocutors Juliet Wajega and Barbara Tournier in [Chapter 13](#).

lack of channels is probably because of the construction of teachers as people who are just told what to do.

Avoiding blame games, and treating professional teaching standards as an evolving consensus document

YUE-YI

Thanks, Carlos. As you respond to that, Laura, could you also start to incorporate the “*how*” question into your thoughts, around approaches for reorienting teacher norms for improved education systemwide?

LAURA

Sure, and I do think the “*how*” and “*why*” are closely coupled. Maybe I’ll bring up three points, and these are more like questions about the “*how*” rather than examples of things I’ve seen done successfully.

The first point relates to the discussion about expectations and incentives, and to something that I underestimated at the outset of my career. I was working within the government building in the Ministry of Education in Malawi and grappling with the budget envelope—aside from salaries, there were challenges with how ingrained the expectation around providing housing for teachers was. There was a massive conversation, along the lines of, “We’re not recruiting enough teachers because there’s not enough housing. So let’s put money into houses.” And then you put money into houses, but then there’s no money left to do anything else. And so on. So I think we sometimes underestimate this question about what the whole package is. Is there clarity, at the outset of a teacher’s career, about what the expectations of the role are and what the returns on that job are?

Again, it comes down to this this point that we’ve made before that we can’t just blame teachers if we don’t deliver on what they’ve been given to expect if they sign up for a job as a teacher. Even if they may not have thought that it was the future path that they were going to go down, they would at least have a house; and there would be access to nutrition because there’s a school feeding programme, which they value because they’ve got a family to provide for. So it’s an entirely unsurprising set of circumstances if we’re ending up with a teaching profession that is that is not performing the way that we expect them to because there are policies in place that go against their expectations and incentives.

Coming back to Carlos’s emphasis on listening to teacher voice, over the years I’ve been in countless strategic planning sessions, joint sector review sessions, surveys, and so forth to capture teacher voice. But I’m not sure that I’ve seen anywhere an

For a related observation on education bureaucracies failing to pay teachers on time, see interlocutor Barbara Tournier’s remarks in [Chapter 13](#).

explicit feedback loop for building in the voice of teachers into an education system's policies and processes. And I'd be fascinated to see and hear one, because when you just get five teachers speaking out in a room, they usually have no real power to speak back to the authorities.

My second point is more related to some of the core work that RISE has done over the years about what I think is a really important point around shifting towards coherence for learning. And I've often wondered about the role of teachers in that shift. Are teachers the driving group that will be able to translate or even to power the shift away from an access-oriented system towards one that's about both access and learning combined? And, to me, that brings up the question of: how can we enact this shift in a way that doesn't assume that teachers don't already value learning? There's a real risk that the policy response to the need to shift the system towards learning could very easily get to the point of blaming the teachers. The highest levels of government could easily end up saying, "Right, we've got a system that's geared toward getting kids into school. Now we need to address why they're not learning. And there are teachers in schools who are there to enable the kids to learn. So if the kids aren't learning, maybe it's the teachers' fault." Let's not blame the teachers. But we have these fundamental questions that we need to answer about shifting towards coherence for learning.

And that leads me to the third point: what worries me is that a lot of the recommendations I see coming out of the research are so massive. The typical "how" recommendation for policy people or for funders is that we need to grapple with recruitment, deployment, professional development, incentives—basically, everything. "Do it all at once. And oh, by the way, while you're doing it, you've got to reorient the curriculum as well as the pedagogy related to the curriculum. Let's pick up every expectation for education and from every actor and make it coherent for learning." You know, I've worked within education systems that have tried to do big, bold things all at once. And in some places, maybe using the word "reform" and trying to do something visionary is actually what's needed to kickstart change. But then we know of so many other instances where that has been tried, and it hasn't worked. Digging into why these big reforms didn't work should surely offer a cautionary tale that says, "Let's not try to do all of it at once."

CARLOS

On the question of how to reorient teacher norms, we're currently working on project on professional teaching standards, whether global, regional, or national frameworks. And when looking at existing standards, you see a commonality between countries and regions. Usually, they set the tone for what teachers need to know: there standards will talk about pedagogical knowledge, described to a T. Second, there's practical experience, and that's not so well-described or well-nuanced. And the third dimension, which is around the ethical dimension, the ontology, the codes of conduct, et cetera, is usually even less tightly described. From what I've seen, more frameworks are now trying to bring in this third dimension—and particularly that ethical aspect

See, for example, Spivack, M. (2021). Applying Systems Thinking to Education: The RISE Systems Framework. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Insight. 2021/028. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-RI_2021/028. On coherence for learning in the teaching profession, see Hwa, Y.-Y., & Pritchett, L. (2021). *Teacher Careers in Education Systems That Are Coherent for Learning: Choose and Curate Toward Commitment to Capable and Committed Teachers (5Cs)*. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Primer. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-Misc_2021/02.

For more from the Teacher Task Force on teacher standards in the broader context of teacher policy, see Section 3.7 in UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030. (2019). *Teacher Policy Development Guide*. UNESCO. <https://teachertaskforce.org/knowledge-hub/teacher-policy-development-guide>.

encompassing the social, the cultural, the relevance, and so on. So this dimension is beginning to be a bit more explicitly emphasised, with clearer descriptions and more nuance in the guidance.

It is also very important to think about the practical dimension of these standards—how they are challenged, defined, refined in practice. These standards are meaningful only once they are put into practice, only once they are reflected upon by teachers themselves, such that they need to be revamped, redone, reconsidered. So, to me, any professional teacher standards are basically a live document, which captures that consensus. First of all, it captures a consensus of what we expect teachers to be able to do. But it should be about what teachers expect to be and do *themselves*. And this changes in time, and this changes in context. That’s why I say it has to be a live document of aspirations and expectations—and one that needs to be fed back with and through teacher practice.

And I think that is also how we realise what to do with those massive recommendations that Laura is talking about. How do you define where to begin? What is most important at this moment and in this particular context? Those are questions that systems and education policymakers and ministers of education cannot answer without the element of experienced realities that teachers have in that context.

So, to me, the way of reorienting norms has to do with the voice of teachers; it has to do with their experience, feeding into these ideas and this consensus on teacher norms. I’m thinking of standards just because that’s what we’re working on right now. But standards are only one expression of these changes, of this reorientation—which should actually be seen as continuous. It is only logical that as education evolves and as societies change, then these ideas and these norms should change as well.

The value of teacher networks, feedback loops, and professional recognition

LAURA

Can I just add in three short examples of things that I’ve seen or heard about that are really exciting, almost in companion to the big policy debates?

YUE-YI

Please do.

LAURA

I think, on one hand, there are the policy debates around, “What is a good place to begin? Should we work on teacher recruitment first? What do we do with

the “ghost” teachers? What do we do with all the teachers who have been in the profession longer but for whom the data tells us (if data is available) that they’re less effective?” You know, there are these really big, data-underpinned policy discussions that I do not envy anyone in those Ministry of Education rooms. But alongside those big discussions, I’ve seen some projects recently that are doing some really nice and quite interesting things that link more to this ongoing process of conversation and voice around expectations for teachers.

One is the work of the likes of CAMFED and Teach for All that are resulting in networks of teachers or ex-teachers. In CAMFED’s case, it’s more networks of teacher coaches. And although they may not be teaching anymore, these are networks of people who have had that experience in the classroom, and who are now going out across a whole range of different parts of society and economy with that perspective ingrained. With those positive classroom experiences and deep thinking about expectations for teachers, the more they can be spread across society and various parts of the economy, the better—because then we might leave behind our own assumptions about our own education and our children’s education, which so often straitjacket some of this work around education. So I like the idea of educators being networked.

I also like the idea of teacher feedback loops, which I’ve seen through this project called Schools 2030 that’s working across 10 countries. It’s a set of a projects driven by human-centred design that is hoping at some point to pull together teacher conferences every year—a little bit like the Education Endowment Foundation do in England, where teachers come together to debate the evidence and the experiences that they’ve had. And this means that teachers can both really feed in their voice to the process and also feel that their voice has been heard. That sort of construction of real feedback loops is really important.

The other example that I think is really quite interesting—even if it may be a tiny, tiny drop in the ocean of the whole debate—is the Global Teacher Prize, which Carlos mentioned just now, and which is an effort to get teaching up there in the public eye as this incredible profession. And even though you end up with something like just 10 teachers shortlisted, the very process of nominating—even if your nominee gets nowhere near the top—implies that you should look across the range of those shortlisted and work out what is it that makes them great. They can come from systems that have everything stacked against them, and yet they’re a brilliant teacher. So there’s that really interesting idea of having something to emulate and the belief that it’s possible to reach that brilliance.

I have no idea how many teachers around the world have heard of any of these things—maybe very few—but then these are just illustrations, to me, of the sort of ongoing work that is grappling with some of the small levers for change within this complex ecosystem around teaching, and that is nudging people and systems towards positive change.

For a related analysis, see Datta, S., & Kingdon, G. (2021). The Myth of Teacher Shortage in India. RISE Working Paper Series. 21/072. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2021/072.

For more on CAMFED, the Campaign for Female Education, see <https://camfed.org/what-we-do/how-we-operate/>.

For more on Teach For All, see <https://teachforall.org/what-we-do> or Chapter 5 of this volume for an interview with Teach For All CEO and co-founder Wendy Kopp.

For more on Schools 2030, see <https://schools2030.org/>.

For more on the Education Endowment Foundation’s Research Schools Network, see <https://researchschool.org.uk/>.

YUE-YI

Thanks for those, Laura. Carlos, in the last two minutes, are there any last thoughts you'd like to leave us with?

CARLOS

On the teacher prizes, I think that would actually be a good research opportunity: looking at how the global, regional, and national prizes construct a conception of what teachers should be. Research on this would be a very interesting avenue for making these constructions clearer.

More generally, I agree with Laura that it's very important for teachers to be networked and for us to actually enable those spaces for peer exchange and peer learning. And I don't think education systems have done enough to capture the conversations that go on in those spaces. It's really about, first, allowing space for these conversations to occur and, second, capturing them.

I also agree with Laura that those spaces are privileged spaces for the possibility of changing norms, as the repercussions and the very substance of the norms themselves are experienced by teachers at the grassroots level. But yet the normative level and institutional level, I don't see any well-established channels for teacher voice other than, as Laura mentioned, some anecdotal participation in decision-making or in policy processes. There are no iterative loops of feedback from teachers, for example. So I just wanted to second that point about the value of the networks of teachers actually reflecting on and speaking about these rules and norms—and that these kinds of things are needed for norms to change.

CHAPTER 16

A reflection on social norms on teachers in Vietnam

Vu Dao & Khoa Vu

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Social norms play a crucial role in influencing individual behaviours. Social norms can be considered to be a set of rules or standards for behaviours that is based on widely shared beliefs about how individuals should act in a given situation (Fehr and Fischbacher, 2004; Young, 2007), or group-level evaluation of behaviours (Horne and Mollborn, 2020). Norm compliance (and deviance) may be due to *actual sanctions* or *fear of sanctions* associated with compliance or deviance, or due to the fact that people

internalise certain norms to be part of their preference (Bicchieri, 2005; Bicchieri and Muldoon, 2011; Horne and Mollborn, 2020).

The RISE interviews with educational researchers across different countries and contexts reveal different ways in which social norms influence teachers and how they teach and interact with students, parents, and their colleagues. In this essay, we reflect on several common themes in these interviews and draw parallels between them and the social norms on teachers that we observe in Vietnam, both from our research findings and from our personal experience as teacher and student in that system. Vietnam provides a unique setting to inquire about social norms on teachers because the Vietnamese educational system is well-recognised both for exceptional performance on international assessments (Dang, Glewwe, Lee, and Vu, 2021) and for its growth over time in terms of accessibility and learning (Dang and Glewwe, 2018). At the same time, the system also has underlying norms, such as the teacher-as-superhero narrative or a lack of teacher autonomy to adjust the curriculum, that are very similar to those of other systems.

Descriptive vs. injunctive norms

Before discussing Vietnam, it is useful to separate two types of social norms from the literature in economics, philosophy, sociology, and sociological psychology. On one hand, *descriptive norms characterize the perception of behaviours that people commonly do in certain situations and those that constitute normal or regular behaviours* (Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno, 1991; Bicchieri, 2005). On the other hand, *injunctive norms characterize the perception of what most people approve or disapprove, i.e., the behaviours that society thinks people should do in a given situation* (Bicchieri and Muldoon, 2011; Horne and Mollborn, 2020). The key difference between what people normally do (descriptive) and what people are expected to do (injunctive) is that the former is always dictated by self-interest: “we conform because such norms make life easier for us ... or simply because they provide evidence of what is likely to be effective, adaptive behaviour,” while the latter is driven by normative expectation (Bicchieri, 2005).

There are two reasons to distinguish between injunctive and descriptive norms. First, researchers often mentioned that certain norms are a result of teachers *choosing to follow* them because they are *an optimal strategy* for teachers given their constraints: **“Norms are so important ... because they make complete sense to teachers ... It’s not just a norm, it is a belief that is completely rational ... there’s a good deal not just of rationalisation, but of completely rational decision-making and optimization that’s happening here”** (Shwetlena Sabarwal, interview). In other words, they are descriptive norms because they are rational choices that teachers make given their constraints. Other norms are, however, described as societal normative expectations for teachers, **“expectations about their moral behaviour, about disciplinary actions ... for example, they are expected to attend school regularly themselves and**

There are three different theories about social norm emergence. The functionalist approach argues that social norms serve specific social functions, such as to reduce transaction costs or externalities (Ellickson, 1991, 1998; Posner, 1997). This explanation is further strengthened by evolutionary game theorists who argue that social norms arise as a result of repeated interaction of people, and such norms exist to reduce transaction costs or externalities of society (Voss, 2001; Bicchieri, Duffy and Tolle, 2004; Binmore, 2010; Young, 2008; Paternotte and Grose, 2013), where successful strategies are retained, and unsuccessful strategies are abandoned, giving rise to norms.

An alternative game-theoretic approach, advanced by Cristina Bicchieri, focuses on a norm-driven preference as a function of standard payoff of a behaviour as well as a loss from an individual’s expectation about how other people would feel about norm violation (Bicchieri, 2005; Paternotte and Grose, 2013; Bicchieri and Sontuoso, 2020). As a result, the social norm arises when individuals internalise social norms and adopt this norm-driven preference.

In contrast, a sociological approach towards injunctive norms suggests that people want to have positive relationships with others, so they speculate about other people’s evaluations of certain behaviours. Social injunctive norms would emerge from this group-level evaluation (Horne, 2001; Horne and Mollborn, 2020).

For Shwetlena’s full remarks, see [Chapter 3](#).

keep a register of students' attendance ...that's what the public expects of them as members of their profession" (Kwame Akyeampong, interview). Teachers follow these norms not because they can benefit from these norms, but because they are expected by the society and teachers may expect to face social or legal sanctions if they do not; these are injunctive norms.

In many situations, the norm that teachers choose to follow is different from the norm that they are expected to do by the society. A clear example of how the two types of norms differ is when teachers are often absent from class because they are expected to do community services outside of classroom:

"[A norm is] that a teacher is more than a teacher, but also a community leader. The teacher is often the only educated community focal person, so the teacher goes on election duty, does public health services, they were enrolled for the COVID response in a lot of places—so it's seen as completely fine for the teacher to be absent from school, because they have many more important things to do than just teach. And it's completely okay to leave children unsupervised with class work to do, and so on." (Shwetlena Sabarwal, interview)

In this example, the social expectation that teachers (should) serve as a community leader is an injunctive norm, whereas the norm that teachers choose to be absent from school is a descriptive norm. While not mentioned here, it is likely that the society does not expect teachers to be absent from class; it is nonetheless a common practice of teachers given their time constraints. Similarly, in some contexts there is a social norm that younger teachers would prepare administrative reports for schools, but given their time constraints, these teachers have to complete these reports while teaching in class (Shintia Revina, interview). The norm of preparing reports in class is unlikely to be desired by society or school, but it arises nonetheless as an optimal strategy of teachers. The emergence of descriptive norms is also analogous to the formation of habits that was discussed in the interview with Mike Hobbiss and Alice Cornish: "Stressful situations are also likely to facilitate both the development and then the production of habitual behaviour. So you learn habits more quickly in stressful environments, and then you also produce them more readily under stress. ... Time pressure and performance pressure is another [factor]" (Mike Hobbiss, interview).

The second reason to distinguish between the two types of norms is that injunctive norms can give rise to a descriptive norm that may coincide with or go against the interest of the society. This phenomenon can be observed several times in the conversations about teacher evaluation and accountability. Specifically, teacher performance is often evaluated based on certain metrics such as average test score (e.g., Yamini Aiyar in [Chapter 8](#), Shwetlena Sabarwal in [Chapter 3](#), Mike Hobbiss in [Chapter 14](#)), student pass rate (David Evans in [Chapter 11](#)), or teacher value-added (Maria Teresa Tatto in [Chapter 11](#)), and there is a widespread expectation that teachers should meet a certain minimum level of performance to be eligible as teachers. This social expectation can lead to teachers pursuing practices that the society does not

See [Chapter 12](#).

Another way to think about why teachers choose to follow certain norms is that some social norms are specific to the teaching profession, and teachers internalise these norms as part of their identity. In other words, if they deviated from a norm specific to the teacher identity, their utility would decrease (Akerlof and Kranton, 2000, 2005). Multiple interviewees discussed teacher identity and norms on teachers. For example, since teaching is often viewed as a "profession of passion", teachers would accept working conditions not necessarily optimal for them (Jessica Holloway, interview in [Chapter 2](#)). In the expectation-based framework, teachers follow norms because of explicit normative expectations. In the identity-based framework, teachers follow norms because they are ideal behaviours that are specific to their identity. See Bicchieri and Sontuoso (2020) for a more technical overview of the two frameworks as well as their empirical evidence.

Full remarks from Shwetlena, Shintia, and Mike are available in [Chapter 3](#), [Chapter 7](#), and [Chapter 14](#), respectively.

In particular, see the discussion between David Evans and Maria Teresa Tatto in [Chapter 11](#) regarding teacher evaluations, and the discussion between Dan Honig and Sharath Jeevan in [Chapter 4](#) about teacher accountability.

necessarily believe that they should do, such as focusing attentions to students who perform better in order to raise the performance of their teachers.

“These classes are so big that a teacher cannot give attention to everybody ... the idea is that the teacher basically decide to back the winning horse, which is a very understandable strategy from an economic rationality standpoint.” (Shwetlena Sabarwal, interview)

See [Chapter 3](#).

“[Teachers believe that] the right thing is to give most of the attention to the higher-performing students ... Teachers have these pressures on them, related to, ‘You need to complete the curriculum, and you’re going to be judged on a pass rate.’ So they say, ‘Well, if I’m going to be judged on my pass rate, then I guess what I have to do is focus on the students who are likely to pass. I mean, I do care about all my students, but I also care about keeping my job.’ ... So one of the dangers of these high-stakes accountability measures is that they can push teachers towards ... focusing on the students who have the best chance of passing, and not those students who are so far behind that even if you helped them learn a lot this year, you might not be able to help them pass the test.” (David Evans, interview)

See [Chapter 11](#).

These definitions of descriptive and injunctive norms provide a useful framework to think about the social norms on teachers because they are explicit about why people conform to those norms as well as how these norms emerge. We can then apply this framework to discuss the norms that educational researchers talked about during their interviews and compare to those that we observe in Vietnam.

Norm of following curriculum

Perhaps the most universal theme across different countries is that teachers are required to strictly follow a curriculum, which can be very long and overwhelming, and they often lack the autonomy to decide on what topic and how in depth to teach or to try out an innovative pedagogy. Reflecting on her teaching experience in Botswana, Katlego Sengadi described her excitement to make her class fun and innovative as a new teacher. However, when she arrived at her school, she quickly realised the sheer pressure that typical teachers face to complete the whole curriculum, to teach like that for so many classes and so many students. This made her realise why teachers often only teach at the minimum level.

For example, interlocutors indicate that teachers have to cover the entire curriculum in Chile and Australia (see Verónica Cabezas and Jessica Holloway’s interview in [Chapter 2](#)), India and Botswana (Lucy Crehan and Katlego Sengadi in [Chapter 5](#)), and Indonesia (Shintia Revina in [Chapter 7](#)).

“... as a young teacher, as a young professional, you’re thinking, ‘Okay, I’m going to be innovating. Classes are so boring these days, and I want my class to be fun. I want students to really have fun in my class. And I really want to target all those that are struggling and those that are not struggling, and see how I can best balance those needs.’

“Unfortunately, when I got to the school, I had so many classes and so many students to deal with that I literally didn’t even know how best I could innovate. And I noticed that everyone was just pushing to get the curriculum going, and no one was thinking about innovations. It was just like, ‘You need to get this curriculum going, you need to finish these topics by the set time.’ We have end-of-month tests that happen in each and every school every month—and so every month, you have a target that you need to get to. Whether your students are progressing quickly or slowly, whether or not they are grasping the concept, it really doesn’t matter. So I immediately felt that pressure, and understood that, ‘Okay, this could really explain why our classes are so tense. It’s because people are just pushing to get the curriculum going.’

“So that was a very shocking experience. Because you come into school with this mindset of what teaching is supposed to look like. But when you get inside the actual classroom, and you face some of the challenges that teachers face, then it becomes more like you need to reach just the minimal bar—‘This is what I need to get my students through’—and that’s it.” (Katlego Sengadi, interview)

Katlego’s reflection implies two underlying norms: the injunctive norm that teachers should (or have to) cover all of the curriculum, which leads to the descriptive norm that teachers choose to teach only what is required and nothing else. In other words, choosing to teach at the minimum level is an optimal strategy given the immense pressure to cover so many topics in the curriculum. Katlego’s accounts of these social norms in Botswana is strikingly similar to what we observed to be social norms in Vietnam. Teachers are also expected to cover the entire curriculum, but more importantly, teachers are also legally required to prepare a lesson plan for each lesson, which would provide a specific outline for how the lesson will be taught. This has also created an enormous pressure on teachers in Vietnam, given that they are required to both teaching many topics and preparing specific lesson plans for these topics.

This social pressure also has significantly shaped the teaching norms in Vietnam. First, teachers have limited time to come up with lesson plans from scratch, so there is a national database of lesson plans that teachers can choose from and adapt to their teaching style (see Joan’s interview in [Chapter 3](#)). Lesson plans can also be purchased online, although the quality may not be guaranteed. Note that using someone else’s lesson plans is a descriptive norm as teachers choose to do it as their optimal strategy. It is, in fact, against the injunctive norm of the Vietnamese society as teachers are expected to devise a lesson plan that is most suitable for their classes, as illustrated by a Vietnamese media reporting what a parent said to a teacher:

“Dear teacher, don’t teachers know how to prepare a lesson plan so they have to purchase one? If you don’t prepare the lesson plan then how can you teach it? How can you teach someone else’s lesson plan?... Selling and buying ‘gray matter’ online seems really inappropriate, right?”

Katlego Sengadi’s story in [Chapter 6](#) is also similar with Juliet Wajega’s experience as a science teacher in [Chapter 13](#).

For more on lesson plans in Vietnam, see Joan DeJaeghere and Shwetlena Sabarwal’s discussion in [Chapter 3](#).

See <https://giaoduc.net.vn/giao-duc-24h/co-thay-co-bat-hoc-tro-soan-bai-con-minh-di-mua-giao-an-vi-dau-nen-noi-post219139.gd?fbclid=IwAR1z1sKgDg34p4T-suxd1vLhgb32jJQ1C7R2PatK6rf7OfU5bavGxd73Dc4>.

This Vietnamese media also reported that the norm of purchasing or relying on others' lesson plans is also driven by the fact that lesson plans are checked only for accountability purposes and teachers may not necessarily use those plans for their actual teaching. According to the teachers interviewed by media, the online lesson plan market exists only because teachers want to have 'pretty' lesson plans as they are assessed by schools or the government, so that they do not receive negative feedback or warnings. An unsatisfactory lesson plan may affect the teacher's overall evaluation. This is especially important when the schools are only interested in whether the teachers fill out the lesson plan form correctly and completely.

Accountability norms

The expectation that teachers have to teach all of the curriculum is part of a larger trend in which there is an increasing demand for accountability among teachers and school, which is also very consistent across different systems. Teachers are expected to teach, at minimum, a number of topics to ensure that students acquire sufficient learning. Another common form of accountability is that teachers are expected to achieve a certain level of performance, which is often measured by the government or schools as test scores, a student pass rate, or value-added measures.

At the same time, these performance measures are also used to quantify learning or teaching impacts and, hence, are used to evaluate students and teachers in most contexts. Parents of students also internalise these metrics as measures of learning, so they may also create even more pressure on teachers. Therefore, teachers have to face both the formal norm (from schools and government) and the informal norm (from parents) to make sure that students have good grades or pass the exam.

"... we don't think of an assessment as a status check. We think of an assessment as something that tells you how good or bad you are. And that's what creates a social consensus ... within which the teacher is anchored.

"So the teacher isn't divorced from all of this. These are the norms that shape how the teacher is approaching the classroom. ... And in that government context where performance is determined by your ability to meet the checklist, then pass percentages, examinations, and syllabus completion become the only metrics that you will consider as relevant to performance. Therefore, you reduce the purpose of teaching just to those metrics." (Yamini Aiyar, interview)

Yamini also commented that:

"... this also plays into social norms of what is accepted as learning in the Indian context. I mean, I'm a parent of two small kids, and I do sometimes find myself saying, ... "If you haven't got two stars in your book, then that's not good at all." And maybe I expect my children to be first in their class,

On the trend toward more accountability, see the interview with Dan Honig in [Chapter 4](#).

Both types of accountability aim to ensure that teachers actually teach in the classroom, as opposed to collecting salary while not doing anything (Masooda Bano, interview in [Chapter 9](#), and David Evans, interview in [Chapter 11](#)).

See [Chapter 8](#).

right? There’s a social conditioning in which we all operate. And that social conditioning prioritises examination marks—that is how we judge the school, that is how the teacher is also judging the school.” (Yamini Aiyar, interview)

Facing this tremendous expectation from schools and parents, teachers are forced to follow the teaching practices that would most likely allow them to achieve the satisfactory performance. For example, when teachers have many students of different levels in their class, they will choose to prioritise those who have a higher chance to pass the class because they are evaluated based on the pass rate (Shwetlena Sabarwal, interview in [Chapter 3](#), and David Evans, interview in [Chapter 11](#)). In other cases, teachers will rush through the curriculum to get passing scores. This illustrates, once again, that an injunctive norm gives rise to descriptive norms: the social normative expectation that teachers and students should meet a certain level of performance leads to the common practices that allow teachers to satisfy those expectations.

The increase in demands for accountability along with the demands that teachers meet a certain level of performance is also very evident in Vietnam. The basic salary of teachers in Vietnam is fixed and, hence, is unrelated to teacher performance, but bonuses do depend on teachers’ performance. Specifically, teachers are evaluated as “Completed their duty excellently”, “Completed their duty well”, or “completed their duty”, which is based on the shares of high-performing and low-performing students. Every year, schools will set the acceptable levels for these shares based on past performance of the department and the past performance of the district or province of the school instead of the actual levels of the intake class. Teachers want to achieve “well” or “excellent” because these are associated with better titles, material bonuses, as well as better historical records for long-term bonuses, promotion, or transferring to other schools. A subtle difference between this norm and the accountability norms that the interlocutors discussed is that Vietnamese teachers are considered good or excellent only when they have both a high number of students who perform well and a low number of students who do not perform well. This creates an incentive for teachers to get all students to learn, at least, at the basic level.

As in other systems, this accountability, which is an injunctive norm on what teachers should do, also results in specific descriptive norms that teachers choose to follow even though society may not necessarily wish for them. As described in an interview with Joan, the “best practice” for teachers is to have a lesson plan and there even exists a national database of various lesson plans which teachers can choose from. We would expect to see variation in how teachers choose their lesson plans. What the RISE Vietnam team finds is, however, that there is a great uniformity in teaching practices, and teachers follow the practices that ensure that all students are learning at least at the basic level (Caneiro, Glewwe, Guha, and Krutikova, forthcoming). However, teachers still believe that some students, such as ethnic minority students, can only barely make it to the basic level and would never study beyond it, so they will only give attention to these students to get to that level but not beyond (DeJaeghere, Dao, Duong, and Luong, 2021). This has also led to a widespread practice of raising scores for low-performing students so that they can be considered to be normal or high-

See Maria Teresa Tatto’s interview in [Chapter 11](#) about the value-added models for teacher evaluations from the No Child Left Behind policy in the US, and Melanie Ehren’s discussion in [Chapter 10](#) about following a scripted curriculum in South Africa.

See https://giaoduc.net.vn/giao-duc-24h/giao-vien-rat-muon-day-that-nhung-ai-danh-gia-ghi-nhan-va-bao-ve-ho-post217949.gd?fbclid=IwAR29u_KTvKpBnllX1TXmYQ7EA6Q_BO_tvYDV2EdXTrEhGCUUXpDqb_xyAF8.

See [Chapter 3](#).

performing students or so that they can pass a grade that they otherwise would not be able to. These conventional practices are clearly inconsistent with the normative expectation that teachers will help all students to learn and, in fact, are against the expectation that teachers have to make sure that students learn, instead of letting them pass the grade.

Injunctive norms can also result in good descriptive norms

In Vietnam, teachers are often expected to research pedagogical practices from other teachers and other schools that are proven to work as they are evaluated based on it. As noted above, Vietnamese teachers subsequently adopt similar teaching practices to ensure that all students can achieve learning at the basic level. We also observed the effect of this incentive during our study about the Vietnam Escuela Nueva (VNEN) programme (Dang, Glewwe, Lee, and Vu, 2021). Originally, only over a thousand primary schools in Vietnam elected to adopt this popular school model from Colombia in 2012, and only these schools received funding to implement this model; we refer to these schools as VNEN schools. However, we observed that non-VNEN schools, i.e., those who chose not to implement the new model in 2012, that were near the VNEN schools also took up different components of this new model despite that they would not receive any funding for it. Why would non-VNEN schools adopt some components of the new model even when there is no monetary incentive for it? One possible explanation is that this programme was found to improve cognitive and non-cognitive skills of students in primary school, so teachers in the non-VNEN schools learned from their VNEN colleagues and adopted it to improve student learning. It is also possible that the VNEN programme was well aligned with the nation-wide educational reform on competency in 2020, so schools wanted to adopt these practices to better prepare for the reform.

Another descriptive norm that enables Vietnamese teachers to transfer knowledge about effective teaching practices quickly is a strong collaboration among teachers within the same school. Teachers in the same subject group (or department) often meet every two weeks to discuss about challenges that they face in teaching and new or effective instructional methods that they learn elsewhere. Teachers also come to observe the classes of their colleagues to learn about others' practices so they may apply to their own. Every semester, teachers can sign up to teach a sample lesson to illustrate how to approach a hard lesson. The norm of extensive collaboration among teachers, along with the pressure to make sure that students achieve the basic level of learning, has provided a strong incentive for teachers to learn and adopt best practices from each other.

Interestingly, the collaboration norm in Vietnam is very similar to the collaboration concept of the STiR Education network that Sharath Jeevan discussed in his interview. The main difference is that STiR is an external organisation created to

Prior to 2020, teachers were also evaluated based on whether they conduct a research project or apply an innovative method in teaching.

It is also important to note that the VNEN programme was not popular among parents, so it was ultimately abandoned.

For the full interview with Sharath Jeevan and fellow interlocutor Dan Honig, see [Chapter 4](#). Interlocutor Juliet Wajega also discusses her observations on STiR's work in Uganda in [Chapter 13](#).

foster collaboration and support among teachers, while the collaboration norm in Vietnam emerges from within the educational system when teachers are given the right incentive and policy supports. Yet we also observe a very different collaboration norm described in other countries such as Australia, where teachers treat professional collaboration as an opportunity to share the workload with each other (Jessica Holloway, interview).

See [Chapter 2](#).

The role of policy in setting and enforcing social norms

What seems puzzling is that despite facing very similar injunctive norms about who teachers should be or what they should do in class, Vietnamese teachers appear to develop very different descriptive norms for what they commonly do, both “good” and “bad” practices, than teachers from other countries. One possible explanation is that Vietnamese teachers face a much larger social and political pressure to ensure that students are learning. London (2021) suggests that the unique historical context of Vietnam, in which the government had to rely heavily on formal and informal co-payments from the society to finance the educational system, has led to substantial engagement between the society and the educational system. This, in turn, has contributed to enhancing the accountability of schools and teachers. London (2021) also argues that the political system of Vietnam strongly prioritises educational policies, reflected in high public expenditure for education, but also imposes more pressure on the educational system to be more accountable. This broader norm about prioritising education is in stark contrast to what has been observed in some other systems:

“... there is something to these unwritten norms in many expanding education systems that have devalued education as a serious enterprise. ... If the ministry doesn’t take education seriously, why should the teachers? So there’s a breakdown of not just accountability of the teachers to the ministry, but of the ministry to the teachers. This lack of seriousness, of mutual accountability, is a very important norm that the teachers begin to absorb.” (Luis Crouch, interview)

See [Chapter 12](#).

In these situations, the lack of a larger norm to value and prioritise education has led to a lack of accountability for teachers. As a result, teachers in these systems are not committed to make sure that students are learning.

Generally, the political system and the government can play a role in setting the injunctive norms on teachers and teaching practices to some extent. For example, the Vietnamese government employs a pay-for-performance system that fosters the norms of collaboration and professional development. It also pursued the accountability policy based on both high- and low-performing students, which enforces the norm of getting students at least to the basic level of learning. These policies were introduced

only after Vietnam went through the *Đổi Mới* economic reform in 1986 to become a socialist-oriented market economy (Joan DeJaeghere, interview in [Chapter 3](#)). As the economy continuously evolves, the political party has also embraced educational reforms, such as the VNEN programme (Dang, Glewwe, Lee, and Vu, 2021) or the most current educational reform towards a competency-based education system, that would allow the educational system to best prepare students for the evolving labour market.

Paradoxically, the policy approach of Vietnam towards other areas of education has also been considerably more conservative or norm-preserving, where norms are similar to those observed in other countries. One particular area where this is very clear is teacher recruitment and retainment. It is relatively easy to get into a pedagogical college or a university in Vietnam. College entrance exam scores required for these schools are relatively low, and tuition and fees are often low or, in many cases, completely waived. Since public school teachers are considered civil servants, their wages are fixed and, according to teachers, are relatively low as well. Teachers, as far as we know, are also rarely transferred among schools, and promotions are also rare. The only attractive feature of the teaching profession is that it offers a very stable career. As in many other societies, it is also considered one of the most noble and respectable professions in Vietnam. These norms around the stability of the career and high respect for the job are strikingly similar to those described in other contexts:

“In many African systems, people’s image of the good teacher is often based on some idea from a different era when teachers were seen in a very positive way. Now, the people who currently go into teaching are very different; often they are choosing teaching as a last resort and we haven’t introduced standards and expectations that sufficiently reflect who is coming into teaching, why, and what we need to do differently to retain and get the best out of them.” (Kwame Akyeampong, interview)

The relatively easy selection process and low benefits in Vietnam have also created widespread concerns that the government cannot attract and retain good teachers, as Kwame described in certain African countries. Given that the Vietnamese society has moved closer towards a market economy, and the government has increasingly responded to the market incentive, there has been surprisingly little discussion about tying the teacher recruitment and hiring to the market conditions.

In other areas, the government may even actively seek to preserve specific norms, such as when critical thinking was left out of the most current educational reform that aimed to prepare necessary skills and competencies for Vietnamese students:

“Critical thinking was initially included in that competency-based reform, and then it got axed. What happened was that competency-based education was approved by the party in 2012 or 13, I believe, and it’s just rolling out in textbooks now, almost nine years later. But through those years, it got reviewed very heavily by the bureaucrats in the system, to define it very carefully so that it would sit alongside the social and political goals of society.

Note that the political party rarely intervenes directly in the daily operations of the educational system. Instead, it only shapes the general direction of educational policies. Formal accountability of teachers is mainly enforced by school principals as well as the Department and Bureau of Education and Training (DoET and BoET).

See [Chapter 12](#). There are similar stories on teacher recruitment in Indonesia (Shintia Revina, interview in [Chapter 7](#)) and teacher careers in an East African country (Barbara Tournier, interview in [Chapter 13](#)).

The social and political goals of society are more concerned with cultural conservatism—maintaining a norm rather than completely disrupting it. So, as I said, critical thinking was left out of it.” (Joan DeJaeghere, interview)

See [Chapter 3](#).

The fact that what teachers can or cannot teach is regulated heavily by the government to preserve or enhance certain cultural or political norms is analogous to the experience of Hong Kong teachers teaching social studies or Chinese history (Ying-yi Hong, interview).

See [Chapter 9](#).

Shifting norms

Overall, these similarities between Vietnam and other countries suggest that changes (or the lack thereof) in social norms on teachers are mainly driven by larger changes in the political, social, and cultural landscapes, and not simply isolated within the educational system itself. At the micro level, we often only observe descriptive norms that are driven by teachers choosing the optimal strategies given their preferences and constraints. We cannot simply change these norms without addressing larger injunctive norms about who teachers should be and what teachers should do. These social expectations about teachers are also wrapped around by even larger social norms around how learning should be defined and what purpose education should serve. In other words, addressing social norms on teachers is often insufficient without addressing the larger injunctive norms around learning. This is reflected in the case of Vietnam, where teachers, policymakers, and politicians have very different opinions about critical thinking as an important competency of the educational system (Duong, Dao, and DeJaeghere, forthcoming).

This is also aligned with a broader discussion about how to shift norms in education, such as the norms around accounting versus accountability in learning. As many interlocutors have indicated, accounting measures such as test scores or value-added are deeply flawed and hence are insufficient to capture learning (see, e.g., Sharath Jeevan, and Dan Honig in [Chapter 4](#), Mike Hobbiss in [Chapter 14](#), Maria Teresa Tatto in [Chapter 11](#), and Honig and Pritchett, 2019). They also do not measure other social aspects of learning that teachers and society may value (Juliet Wajega, interview in [Chapter 13](#)) or the invisible relationship between teachers and students (Sharath Jeevan and Dan Honig, interview in [Chapter 4](#)). A good starting point, then, would be a shift away from the norm of accounting-based accountability, i.e., using hard measures/numbers, and more towards account-based accountability, i.e., using explanations that are based on verifiable facts, reasoning, and interpretation (Dan Honig’s interview in [Chapter 4](#); Honig and Pritchett, 2019). Alternatively, there can be a shift in what test scores are used for, such as to start a discussion among teachers about what the learning challenges are:

“So in Delhi, for instance, they were freed up during the first few months of the experiment, to say, “You can teach in the class the way you want. Syllabus completion is not the goal. Bringing children’s learning levels to

a place where they are closer to grade-level expectations is the goal.” And we found that the question on everybody’s mind is, “What does that mean? What does it mean to teach differentially? What does it mean to teach outside the syllabus?” ...

“When the staffroom conversations moved away from only complaining, toward some complaining but also talking about whether children in their classes were ready to pass the exams or not, and then shifted even further forward to where they were still talking about children’s ability to pass the exam or not but adding a little bit more into that to discuss what the learning challenge was; I think that’s pretty good progress.” (Yamini Aiyar, interview)

See [Chapter 8](#).

Across the spectrum of discussions about social norms around teaching practices and teachers, there is a consensus that teachers’ voices are strongly needed when thinking about shifting norms. The norm towards accounting-based accountability and datafication of education means that many people who are unfamiliar with teaching and education, such as data scientists and data analytic companies, have an increasingly important voice in the policymaking process (Jessica Holloway, interview), which, in turn, has crowded out the voice of teachers. Valuable suggestions to fill in this void include having teachers present in policymaking discussions, incorporating their opinions in policymaking, and translating and communicating new policies.

See [Chapter 2](#).

Conclusion

Vietnam offers an interesting comparative case study because on one hand, the social expectations for who teachers should be and what they should do in class are similar to those of other countries. On the other hand, there are subtle differences in norms or policies that allow Vietnamese teachers to excel in collaboration and adopting effective teaching methods. In the broader discussion about shifting norms in accountability and learning measures, however, Vietnam is very much in the same boat as the other countries, as it struggles to arrive at a consensus of how teaching and learning should be defined or assessed.

As laid out in this essay, distinguishing between descriptive norms, i.e., practices that people choose to follow because they are optimal strategies, and injunctive norms, i.e., practices that society expects people to follow, provides a useful framework to understand how norms emerge. Although this is beyond the scope of this paper, this framework can also be very useful to understand why teachers choose to conform to certain norms, especially injunctive norms even when there may not be any formal enforcement. For example, teachers conform to the norm of serving as the community leader (Shwetlena Sabarwal, interview) or the norm of helping older teachers with administrative reports (Shintia Revina, interview) even though these duties may not be officially required of teachers and doing them would take time and effort.

For full remarks from Shwetlena and Shintia, see [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 7](#), respectively.

Bicchieri (2005, 2013) argues that conformity to injunctive norms is driven by both empirical expectation and normative expectation. That is, teachers conform to certain injunctive norms when (a) there are enough people who follow the norm (empirical), and (b) there are enough people who believe that teachers should conform to the norm (normative). In contrast, conformity to descriptive norms requires only empirical expectations. This is useful because both concepts of empirical and normative expectations as well as the causal link between these expectations and certain social norms can be tested empirically using survey experiments. This can also allow researchers to quantify the contribution of each expectation and provide policy recommendations for how to reshape certain social norms on teachers as well as broader norms around learning and teaching.

An example of this is Bicchieri et al. (2022), who administer survey questions about empirical and normative expectations about breastfeeding behaviour in Mali. The authors also randomly vary these expectations to identify the causal link between them and norm conforming.

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CHAPTER 17

The influence of schools in shaping teacher norms

Sameer Sampat

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UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank recently released their Education Recovery Report about recouping learning losses that occurred before and during the COVID pandemic. They advocate for governments to adopt the strategy encompassed by the clever acronym RAPID:

- | **R**each every child and retain them in school;
- | **A**ssess learning levels;
- | **P**rioritise teaching the fundamentals;
- | **I**ncrease catch-up learning and progress beyond what was lost; and
- | **D**evelop psychosocial health and well-being so every child is ready to learn.

This is a very sensible set of priorities. Yet, much of making this happen is dependent on teachers utilising these practices as the status quo. The report begins to discuss how education systems can ensure these teaching practices can become the norm, largely via support and resources that should be provided to teachers. What the report fails to outline is how status quo teaching practices become established in the first place.

It is important that teacher support and resources are based on an understanding and clear articulation of how teacher behaviours come to be. Teacher norms may

See p. 5 in UNICEF, UNESCO, & The World Bank. (2022). *Where are we on education recovery?* <https://www.unicef.org/reports/where-are-we-education-recovery>.

explain many of the reasons for systems where students are learning less than expected, as “many education systems have inadvertently developed norms of teacher practice that prioritise syllabus completion, exam-oriented rote learning, or administrative compliance—rather than student learning” (RISE prompt for this essay). Additionally, teacher norms may also represent the best resource education systems have available to address low levels of student learning, as outlined by Soufia Anis Siddiqi:

They [i.e., teachers] pay out-of-pocket to make sure that kids will get their stationery because their parents can’t afford it. ... teachers run enrolment drives to make sure that kids come to school, and they will go and literally fetch the students in their class from their homes. ... they actually seemed to be internalising this responsibility to go and do that extra work of the parent.

For the full interview with Soufia and fellow interlocutor Yamini Aiyar, see [Chapter 8](#).

Given that many school systems are not able to support students to learn at grade-level, a challenge only worsened by the pandemic, establishing an understanding of teacher norms is critical at this moment.

Understanding and effectively institutionalising positive teacher norms is a complicated task. It does not lend itself to most research or policy discussions because of its long-term nature as well as the wide range of fields it touches. This essay is part of a collection of reflective essays that attempts to spark further work on teacher norms and is based on the interviews of 28 researchers, policymakers, and practitioners discussing the “what”, “how”, and “why” of teacher norms in low- and middle-income country school systems.

Start with schools as norm shaping

For education systems to begin work on teacher norms, they should start with the unit of society that they understand best: schools. While **“it’s important to understand the micro-level and macro-level norms”**, and teacher norms are shaped by a much broader set of inputs than the school alone, the school as a norm-shaping unit is a useful entry point into the discussion.

Quoted from interlocutor Verónica Cabezas in [Chapter 2](#).

This essay outlines how schools shape teacher norms via four mechanisms:

1. Teacher norms are shaped by observing what other teachers are doing.
2. Teacher norms are influenced by teachers’ managers and the overall school environment.
3. Teacher norms are influenced by the expectations of students’ parents and caregivers.
4. Teacher norms are influenced by the teachers’ own experience with schooling.

Teacher norms are shaped by observing what other teachers are doing

The first mechanism through which schools impact teacher norms is via teachers' reliance on their peers to make sense of their job. This occurs since, among other reasons, what is required in practice is often different from what is taught in preservice training. Luis Crouch relays this in his conversations with teachers:

I've typically asked the teachers, "What do you think has changed that's helping you teach better now?" And the almost universal refrain among the teachers is, "Well, when we previously got trained, we were never actually taught how to teach. We were taught philosophy and we were taught sociology, but the actual professional skills of teaching were not taught to us in the teacher training colleges."

For the full interview with Luis and fellow interlocutor Kwame Akyeampong, see [Chapter 12](#).

Similarly, Lucy Crehan points to:

that gap between, on one hand, the expectations that you set for yourself, along with the expectations that are set for you when you do your initial teacher training, and all the talk about innovations and all these exciting things you're going to do. And then, on the other hand, the reality of what is actually demanded of you when you get to school.

For the full interview with Lucy and fellow interlocutor Katlego Sengadi, see [Chapter 6](#).

Teaching many students who are at different learning levels is a complex task and the current preservice training given to teachers often leaves them woefully underprepared for this challenge.

I lived this first-hand early in my career when I was a secondary school mathematics teacher. Much of my preservice university training was theoretical, leaving me feeling very unprepared for the day-to-day realities required to engage a classroom full of 15-year-olds. I relied almost exclusively on my fellow teachers to understand so much of my role, from the basics, like implementing the least disruptive process to take daily student attendance, to the more complicated, like balancing high expectations with a supportive classroom culture for students who were voicing challenges with their home environments. Alice Cornish captures the importance of peer observation in shaping norms when she said, "**the people that I leaned on very much were peers who had been in the same sort of situation with the same challenges that I had in the classroom.**" The nature of the role and the training provided for it means that teachers learn much about how to behave from their peers at their school site.

See [Chapter 14](#).

When teachers rely on their peers to understand behavioural norms, motivated teachers can find either resistance or encouragement from their peers to try new practices. In an example from Pakistan, "**these motivated teachers are normally being discouraged by their colleagues**" But more motivated teachers that are senior "**can influence the school, and they're not the type who will be crowded out by the non-working culture**" (Masooda Bano, RISE interview). Teachers rely on their peers for

See [Chapter 9](#).

guidance, particularly early in their careers, which can heavily influence the practices they standardise for themselves throughout their time as teachers.

In situations where students are not making sufficient progress in learning, teacher norms can be formed around this belief that some students can't learn, so teaching each child is futile. As Masooda Bano notes:

... there's a pervasive anti-work culture where teachers do not teach in the classroom ... And they'll ridicule the teachers who want to teach, "Why are you working? These children are from poor backgrounds, they won't learn anyway."

For the full interview with Masooda and fellow interlocutor Ying-yi Hong, see [Chapter 9](#).

A critical component to effective teaching is operating with the understanding that all students can learn if they are provided a supportive school environment. When this understanding is not there, teacher norms can develop that may discourage teachers from reaching struggling students.

While some teacher practices can be detrimental to student learning, the same norms at times can be creatively shifted to promote student engagement. As Alice Cornish relates:

There was an example that I saw from Justice Rising in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where they're developing chalkboard guides, in which they essentially provide a model of how you use the chalkboard as a teacher. They had observed lessons for a long period of time and realised that, in the DRC, teachers are very reliant on the chalkboard as a mode of teaching. And so they were harnessing that societal norm of using the chalkboard, and through the teacher's guide they were trying to build certain habits about how you can give explanations and how you can use the chalkboard to apply principles of dual coding by accompanying what you're writing on the chalkboard with a really great spoken explanation.

For the full interview with Alice and fellow interlocutor Mike Hobbiss, see [Chapter 14](#).

I was struck by how the interviews on teacher norms cumulatively had more discussion around the norms detrimental to student learning as opposed to those supportive of student learning. While this is understandable given that most of the discussants were speaking about their experience with systems that are vastly underperforming for students, a more deliberate discussion of positive teacher norms that spread through peers would be useful for practitioners and policymakers that attempt to support the use of such practices.

When positive teacher norms develop in a school, they can spread effectively through peer networks as "**teachers really enjoy working together and collaborating and getting feedback from their peers.**" (Barbara Tournier, RISE interview). While it is important to create strong teacher networks to model best practices, it is important to pay attention to how teachers interact with the supervisory layer in their schools, as Sharath Jeevan outlined:

See [Chapter 13](#).

I've been very inspired by all we've seen about the value of horizontal networks. STiR ended up running about 8,000 horizontal networks a month, pretty much. But that wasn't the challenge, because the networks themselves work really well. What we learned, though, is that the horizontal layers are important, but they need support from the vertical as well, because you're in a bureaucratic system. It's about giving space. So the leader above that network—whether that's the principal in the school or the district inspector or whoever it is in the structure—how do they “bless” that network and that create that space where teachers feel they can support each other in the network safely?

For the full interview with Sharath and fellow interlocutor Dan Honig, see [Chapter 4](#).

Teacher norms are influenced by their managers and overall school environment

The second mechanism through which schools impact teacher norms is via the overall school environment created by those that manage teachers. An organisation's management and environment influence the behaviour norms of its constituents, and schools and teachers are no different.

Through our work at Global School Leaders, where we have worked with thousands of principals, vice-principals, and teacher leaders, we see that leaders influence teacher norms in stated and unstated ways. Often school systems explicitly task school leaders to maintain certain teacher norms: **“we have the administrative and school governance structures, and the way the headteachers relate to the teachers—these can also contribute to how norms change”** (Juliet Wajega, RISE interview). School leaders are often given clear responsibility for assigning teachers their teaching and non-teaching duties and tracking teacher attendance in school.

See [Chapter 13](#).

While the concrete responsibilities school leaders are given are influential in teacher norm setting, we find that teacher norms are also heavily influenced by the implicit values communicated to teachers in the way school leaders carry out their role. School leaders set teacher norms by what they do and do not pay attention to. In an example described by Shintia Revina:

the dilemma was coming from the pressure that she got from her school principal, who keep chasing her about the reports because she is a young teacher who is able to work on reports using technology, which is something that older teachers cannot really do. She said that the school principals never asked whether or not students were learning effectively in her classroom, you know—as long as teachers come to the classroom and keep students busy, principals will not raise any concerns. Even when a teacher just sits at her desk while completing the school report, this practice is something acceptable. So what matters to the principal is the reports. Whether or not students are learning in her classroom, that doesn't really matter.

For the full interview with Shintia and fellow interlocutor Belay Hagos, see [Chapter 7](#).

As this example illustrates, school leaders influence teacher norms by what they prioritise and what they hold teachers accountable for.

School leaders also influence teacher norms by shaping the way teachers and students interact with each other. In Wendy Kopp's words:

I think norms have so much to do with school culture—the collaboration, the ongoing feedback, the support, the nature of the mission of the school, and how much folks are brought together as a team in pursuit of that mission. Having seen the importance of the school culture, across so many communities and countries, reinforces for me your point about the importance of norms.

For the full interview with Wendy and fellow interlocutor Margarita Gómez, see [Chapter 5](#).

Oftentimes the school leader can be most influential in shaping teacher norms through indirect, and often invisible, practices they do to set the school culture and teacher collaboration structures.

Attempts to influence teacher norms, without additionally influencing of leadership to shape norms, can be doomed to fail. As observed by Michael Woolcock:

... if a teacher is doing that alone, the sustained pressure of trying to change what is normal and normative for others can eventually break you. What any individual teacher does has to be undertaken as part of something bigger. The teachers need to have that sense that there is positive tone setting in the school—mostly set by the principal—about what it means to be part of this larger community, and how we learn to get along.

For the full interview with Michael and fellow interlocutor Melanie Ehren, see [Chapter 10](#).

This poignant example from Sharath Jeevan shows how quickly a teacher that was bucking the norm had to change course when leadership, in this case from the district, was not invested in this change:

... we worked with a teacher who had changed around his classroom and started to do some really interesting work to get more peer learning going. His district inspector came in unannounced, and when he saw this peer learning he basically shouted at him. Within minutes, or even seconds, all of that work that had taken place over months just evaporated.

See [Chapter 4](#).

Any effort to influence teacher norms must take into account the leadership layer within schools.

In order to ensure that teacher norms are oriented toward student learning, school leaders must be recognized for their de jure and de facto role in shaping these norms. This will require leaders in getting feedback, both positive and critical, in their performance on these aspects of their role, as Michael says: **“Principals are mostly just criticised for the things that go wrong rather than praised for the things that go right, so how can we create a whole different culture around what’s recognised and rewarded by these principals?”** While some of the direction for schools comes from

See [Chapter 10](#).

ministries of education and local government officials, we find that school leaders and teachers can also be influenced by the parents of the students attending their school.

Teacher norms are influenced by what the parents and caregivers of their students expects of teachers

The third mechanism through which schools impact teacher norms is the feedback they receive from the parents and caregivers that send their children to school. Parents and caregivers put a lot of trust in schools. In many cases, parents and caregivers make great effort and sacrifice to keep their child enrolled in and attending school. I recall a parent of a student in school that we worked with in Delhi, India telling me, “I wake up at 4a every day to give my child a good education so that they don’t have to do the type of work I’m doing.” It follows that parents and caregivers will have expectations for their children’s schooling. Schools function most effectively when leaders and parents are reinforcing the same set norms and maintain these expectations for all teachers and students. **“When our team did fieldwork in these high and low-attendance places, there was just an entirely different set of normative expectations that both school leaders and community members had set regarding ‘what happens around here’”**(Michael Woolcock, RISE interview). Parents, caregivers, and community members are often the stakeholder most passionate about the types of behaviours they would like to see teacher exhibit.

See [Chapter 10](#).

Parents often have clear views about what schools should deliver. As Masooda Bano observed:

I’ve never had a situation where the community doesn’t know which school, in their view, is a good school, and which is a bad school. And that’s a lot to do with the kind of teachers they see in those schools: they’re around, they’re visible, the students go home and they talk nicely about the teacher to the parents.

See [Chapter 9](#).

And yet this might not include an expectation that all students thrive. Shwetlena Sabarwal describes a billboard that she saw in Bangladesh:

It had photos of these three students who got 100 upon 100 in the national standardised exam. And that’s when it just hit me that the whole society is set up to think about learning as the three or four chosen children who crack this very difficult exam, right? And nobody talks about minimum proficiency. So their idea of learning is not how many children can do addition with carryover; it is how many children get 100 out of 100 in the primary school leaving exam. So that, for me, has been very transformative.

For the full interview with Shwetlena and fellow interlocutor Joan DeJaeghere, see [Chapter 3](#).

In order to positively influence teacher norms, schools may need to more intentionally and proactively co-create their mission in partnership with their parent and caregiver community. Wendy Kopp reflects on this in her work:

I've said many times that if I could start this whole endeavour of ours over again, I would begin by putting at the centre of the work in any given community—because our network partner organisations cluster their teachers within geographic regions—an effort to co-create a vision of student success, which is essentially the purpose. Meaning, we would first bring all the stakeholders together around the question of: “What are we working towards? By the time our kids are young adults, what do we want to be true?”

See Chapter 5.

Truly engaging parents and caregivers in setting and resetting teacher norms, requires school systems to also understand how equity dynamics between the teachers and the students can translate to teacher practices. Yamini Aiyar outlines an example from India: “But we never talk about what it means for an upper-caste, educated, usually middle-class individuals, to walk into a school with physically broken infrastructure and so on, but also to be dealing with children who come from a completely different background, which in some ways is a burden to your ability to achieve your purpose as a teacher.” At Global School Leaders, we have found that both teacher and parent norms are shaped by power inequities that are a result of economic and demographic differences between teachers and the communities they serve, and yet these are rarely addressed in programmes or research. This may be a particularly difficult task in education, given that teacher so heavily rely on their personal experience with schooling to shape their teaching practice.

See Chapter 8.

See <https://www.globalschoolleaders.org/>.

Teacher norms are influenced by the teachers' own experience with schooling

The fourth mechanism through which schools impact teacher norms is via the teachers' own childhood experience as students. One unique and unexplored aspect of teacher behaviour is how much they learn from their time as students. “It's the only profession where you actually experience beforehand what teachers do before you become one” (Kwame Akyeampong, RISE interview). I know my own teaching was so heavily influenced, consciously and likely unconsciously, by my favourite teachers that I had as a student. The more than sixteen years I spent as a student had to have more influence over my teaching style than the one year of teacher preparation courses I took.

See Chapter 12.

Given that teachers' time as students so heavily impacts their teaching practice, the development and changing of teacher norms is a long-term endeavour. As Melanie Ehren said:

Norms develop over time. And there is a kind of path dependency in how norms develop, because if teachers have been taught in a dysfunctional school themselves, then that's their experience of what's normal, to some extent. And children who have been taught in a school like that will also have those expectations of teaching.

For the full interview with Melanie and fellow interlocutor Michael Woolcock, see [Chapter 10](#).

Teacher norms are also influenced by prior schooling experiences of teachers and those who influence their career decisions. My path from being a student to becoming a teacher was both seen as commendable as well as questionable. People thought that it was great that I was doing something I was passionate about. And yet, many openly wondered if it was the best I could do. This dynamic is captured by David Evans when he recalls a conversation with a teacher he had:

I said, "Why did you become a teacher?" And you know, most people, no matter why they actually become a teacher, will say something like, "Oh, because I wanted to help children," or, "because I love teaching!" But this person, in a moment of candour, said, "Well, I didn't get into university." And so their best option was to go to a teacher training college and become a teacher. ... their motivation was, fundamentally, about teaching being the best job that they could get.

For the full interview with David and fellow interlocutor Maria Teresa Tatto, see [Chapter 11](#).

These prior expectations can set norms around teaching being both a passion project as well as a field for the less capable, thus lowering the professionalism and expectations associated with the position.

Some speculations about how norms may shift

I have outlined why education systems should start with schools when they reflect on how teacher norms are shaped. And yet, I've mostly stayed away from suggesting ideas for how norms may shift. This is largely because the main idea I am left with is quite speculative and unformed.

Most norm-shifting seems to be a result of complex interactions between social, economic, cultural, and political economy forces. Yet in my work with schools and school systems, I have seen that the spark of positive shift in norms happens when these larger societal forces are combined with a small group of people in some capacity of power that display a high degree of "moral authority." A classic example of this is the principal who shows up early every day to clean the school, despite this not being legally required nor commonly done, making it such that the others in the school feel like they must also do their part in school improvement. The actions of these vanguards make it so that the expectations of behaviour for those around them change, often to not disappoint the vanguards. Learning from social movements can be one source of inspiration and frameworks for ways that these may be applied to teacher norms,

And yet, the concept of moral authority as a mechanism for shaping norms has many challenges:

1. Moral authority, and the concentration of influence in a few, can lead to horrible consequences if this gets manipulated;
2. The positives shift in behaviour may quickly reverse when the vanguards are no longer involved, particularly if the shifts don't have time to spread across people and time to become the new norms
3. There is no policy lever to pull related to moral authority
4. What is defined as moral authority will vary quite a bit across cultural contexts, perhaps even within one school system, leading to the marginalisation of non-dominant groups; this may also lead to a difficulty in understanding which norms may be resonant in which communities/people/countries.

All of this to say, I don't have great ideas for ways to shift the norm equilibrium in deteriorating or "low norm" systems. And the few ideas I do have are rife with challenges.

Closing thought

Understanding how default teacher practices come to be is a required step in improving those practices. Yet, this is an endeavour that is multifaceted and long-term in nature, as Michael Woolcock notes:

... there aren't quick fixes to changing social norms, but not because we don't try hard enough, aren't smart enough, or aren't funded enough, but because it really does take a long time for some norms to change, and often in a decidedly non-linear way. ... But you can't really engineer that [i.e., changing teacher norms].

See [Chapter 10](#).

While the school unit provides a useful starting point for education researchers and policymakers to understand teacher norms, it is important that the voice and lived experience of teachers and students be central to this discussion in future initiatives. Yamini Aiyar summarises this well when she says,

... when we think about how to change norms, we need to recognise that change is not a matter of simply changing the metric. It's actually about long, deep engagement with the changed metric in a way that allows the teacher to work through that journey of transition.

For the full interview with Yamini and fellow interlocutor Soufia Siddiqi, see [Chapter 8](#).

While influencing teacher norms is a complicated and long-term endeavour, teacher norms may also be a critical catalysing or limiting factor in the ability of school systems to further organize around promoting student learning.

CHAPTER 18

Teachers as the key to global learning progress

Barbara Bruns

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What makes a great teacher—or even a “good enough” teacher? And why do teachers behave the way they do? These two seemingly simple questions are essential for understanding the skills and performance of the people who are at the heart of every education system in the world and who are the most important driver of why and how students learn: teachers.

This book explores these questions in a thoroughly original and engaging way, capturing the perspectives of educators, researchers, education entrepreneurs, and union representatives from almost twenty different countries through paired conversations designed to illuminate the commonalities and differences in teacher characteristics and behaviour across the world. The conversations bring forth the perspectives of economists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, teacher educators, civil society activists, and teachers themselves. The juxtaposition of diverse perspectives generates deep insights into the quality and performance of teachers in countries ranging from Ethiopia, Ghana, Chile and India to Vietnam, Australia, Japan, and Finland.

Although backed in all cases by rigorous research, what stays with the reader are vivid stories of the lived experience of teachers trying to do their job in conditions ranging from mud-walled schools with 120 students per class to towering, tech-endowed buildings in wealthy cities. A novice teacher in Africa disillusioned on her first day by a school director chastising her for joining a low status profession; a young

Indonesian teacher who feels guilty for not attending to her students because she must do all the school's administrative reports since the older teachers don't know how to use computers. And, most common of all, teachers who work in education systems overwhelmingly geared to identifying and nurturing the few students who will "make it" and harbour a deep, corrosive belief that not all children can learn. Like the third-grade teacher in Brazil who once told me in a voice the whole class could hear: "João's father is in prison; how can he be expected to read by third grade?"

But the contribution of this book is not only to unpack the forces and factors leading to widespread learning failure across the developing world, but also to highlight examples and strategies that are producing positive change in these very contexts.

Diverse realities with common issues

Looking across the full, fascinating set of discussions, three big issues transcend country contexts.

A profession of declining standards and prestige. Many of the discussions paint a vivid picture of the declining status of the teaching profession; university students today enter teacher education as a "last resort" profession in a great many countries. As education systems expanded massively, public education funding failed to keep pace; at the same time, other high-status professions became increasingly open to women. Accordingly, both relative salaries and academic standards for teachers have declined in a wide swath of the developing world, as well as in many developed countries, including the US and Australia. Teacher education delivered by private, for-profit providers has been one of the fastest-expanding segments of higher education in many developing countries. Designed to squeeze maximum revenues out of minimal cost training, programmes are relatively short, and in many cases online only; by 2016, over 40 percent of new teachers in Brazil graduated from online-only programmes. In addition to low-to-nonexistent academic standards for entry, this pre-service education offers no hands-on experience in schools working in a classroom environment. The contrast is sharp with teacher education in higher-performing countries such as Cuba, where over 70 percent of training is spent on practice teaching in schools, and Finland, where teacher training schools are co-located with regular schools and training includes not only substantial teaching practice but also conducting applied research in schools. Interlocutors also point to curricula dominated by philosophy, theory, and sociology in today's pre-service teacher education. One tells the story of a US teacher training programme where courses focus on the failures of the education system, rather than practical skills for better teaching. This is widely true in Latin America as well; one Secretary of Education put it well, observing that while teaching is a craft as well as a profession, teacher preparation in the region is the equivalent of preparing surgeons through courses on the history of medicine.

On Brazil, see INEP Brasil (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas). 2016. Higher Education statistical abstract.

On Cuba, see Chapter 3 in Bruns, B., & Luque, J. (2015). *Great teachers: How to raise student learning in Latin America and the Caribbean*. World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/20488>.

On Finland, see the websites for Finnish Teacher Training Schools (<https://fts.fi/>) or for the teacher training schools at the University of Helsinki's Faculty of Educational Sciences (<https://www.helsinki.fi/en/faculty-educational-sciences/faculty/training-schools>).

On the US example, see remarks from interlocutor Luis Crouch in Chapter 12.

To be sure, the “deprofessionalisation” or “devaluation” of teachers and the challenges they face take graphically different forms in the widely different country contexts this book captures—from rural African teachers who may go months without pay, to a teacher in Abu Dhabi whose work is totally unappreciated by a school director unable to perceive that students are actually learning, to UK teachers who feel unable to pursue creative strategies in the classroom because they are burned out from high-stakes testing, to teachers in Hong Kong increasingly fearful of the shrinking space for open expression. That is the great delight of this book; it transports the reader literally across the world for insights into the lives, work, and thinking of teachers.

Ill-conceived and over-ambitious curricula. Interlocutors from Botswana to India to Malaysia to the UK describe teachers who are overwhelmed by pressures to cover an overly broad and ambitious curriculum, in many places linked to high-stakes examinations that occur at the end of the primary or secondary school cycle and that literally shape students’ life chances. Teachers describe “chasing the curriculum” to cover the syllabus each year while knowing that many students are not mastering the content. Linked to this and underlying it is a culture of education as a winnowing process designed to identify and reward the highest-talent students, a culture which accepts that many students will not thrive or survive to access university-level studies. A complicating factor noted by several interlocutors is the spread of “accountability policies” introducing school- or classroom-level incentives for test-score progress, which leads teachers and schools quite rationally to focus effort on the students with greatest chances for success. Interlocutors also note a more deeply embedded teacher norm that the students who work hardest “deserve” more support and attention.

Teachers as cogs in the civil service. The third and most profound issue is the role of teachers as civil servants, particularly in large democracies where patronage jobs and contracts in education are a core instrument of a clientelist public sector. In these countries, jobs as school directors and local administrators are bought and sold and incumbents change with the party in power; teachers are hired through political connections and their tenure and salaries have nothing to do with their students’ learning. An Indonesian interlocutor describes the “**obedience culture**” where “**being an excellent teacher is second to being a good civil servant.**” In such contexts, teacher absence to do election duty, census tasks, help with vaccination campaigns, or other administrative or political activities is completely acceptable, even if it means children are left alone in a classroom. One interlocutor describes parts of South Asia as descending to the point of “anti-work” culture where teachers actually ridicule colleagues who want to teach, asking, “**Why are you working? These children are from poor backgrounds, they won’t learn anyway.**” Worse, the same perverse incentives play out at the next level of government, where a school with good performance is perceived as a threat rather than celebrated, because “**it puts pressure on the district government to improve the other schools as well.**” In contexts where the core goals of the education system are so profoundly mis-aligned with promoting student learning, it is impossible to imagine individual teachers or schools righting the ship.

See remarks from interlocutor Shintia Revina in [Chapter 7](#).

See remarks from interlocutor Masooda Bano in [Chapter 9](#).

Reshaping education systems to promote learning

And yet ... this book's rich exploration of the myriad ways in which education systems are failing children across the world is only half the story—and the backdrop to encouraging examples of profound and sustained change. Here again, there is surprising convergence, with seven core strategies being pursued across widely diverse contexts. Another source of encouragement is the extent to which learning improvement across the world is being stimulated and supported by new knowledge, thanks to expanded data on student learning, growing impact evaluation evidence on specific interventions, and broader research focused on education system performance, very notably through the RISE (Research in Improving Systems of Education) programme, which generated this book.

Focus on foundational literacy and numeracy for all. Perhaps the area of greatest progress is evidence on the importance of foundational literacy and numeracy skills and how to impart these effectively. India, Kenya, Northeast Brazil, rural Colombia, Bangladesh, Liberia, and Botswana have shown that the key to “learning for all” is ensuring that all children master reading and basic math in the first few grades of schooling, and that this is indeed possible. Successful experiences have some common elements: a streamlined curriculum, continuous assessment of student progress, learning materials that embed expertise into the content and sequencing of lessons, student groupings and self-paced exercises that allow for progress at different speeds, and ongoing support for teachers in using the new approaches. It is notable that the principles and materials in many cases originated with pilot programmes such as the Escuela Nueva in Colombia and Pratham's “Read India”, before demonstrating success and being taken to scale. A key element stressed by interlocutors in this volume is the importance of changing teachers' beliefs by showing them that the same children can learn more. As one interlocutor puts it, progress at the classroom level is driven 40 percent by teachers' mindsets and 60 percent by technique.

Effective support for better teacher practice. A strikingly consistent research finding is that teacher practice—whether measured through classroom level value-added learning results or much simpler indicators such as time on instruction—varies widely across teachers, even in the same school. Large-scale classroom observation research across six countries in Latin America found the variation in the percentage of class time teachers spent on instruction *within* individual schools was typically 80 percent as large as the variation across all schools in an entire national sample—a staggering finding. Differences in the rates of learning progress achieved by individual teachers in the same school can be similarly large. All of this data points to the scope for teacher collaboration at the school level as a potentially powerful instrument for harmonising and improving teacher practice.

Interlocutors point to Japan's “lesson study” practice of teachers at the school level working together on the most effective ways to present curriculum content and

On foundational literacy and numeracy, see (a) Piper, B., Simmons Zuilkowski, S., Dubeck, M., Jepkemei, E., & King, S. J. (2018). Identifying the essential ingredients to literacy and numeracy improvement: Teacher professional development and coaching, student textbooks, and structured teachers' guides. *World Development*, 106, 324–336. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.01.018>. (b) <https://prathamusa.org/website-admin/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/FINAL-Read-India-Case-Study-1.pdf>. (c) Loureiro, A., Cruz, L., Lautharte, I., & Evans, D. K. (2020). *The State of Ceara in Brazil is a Role Model for Reducing Learning Poverty*. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/34156>. (d) Carroll, L., Reyes, A., & Trines, S. (2020). Education in Colombia. *World Education News + Reviews*. <https://wenr.wes.org/2020/06/education-in-colombia-2>.

See remarks from interlocutor Wendy Kopp in [Chapter 5](#).

See Chapter 2 in Bruns, B., & Luque, J. (2015). *Great Teachers: How to raise student learning in Latin America and the Caribbean*. World Bank. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/833781468238477204/Great-Teachers-how-to-raise-student-learning-in-Latin-America-and-the-Caribbean>.

assess student learning, Vietnam’s widely shared, well-developed lesson plans, and the expertise embedded in Finland’s “excellent” textbooks, which bolster, rather than detract from, a high degree of teaching autonomy. These, plus “scripted” teaching materials are all strategies for establishing a floor of adequate teacher practice across the education system. While interlocutors see the power of teachers sharing practice, several cautioned that this requires a level of trust within the school or school system more broadly. A Chilean educator notes the disconnect between the desire for school-level collaboration and the financial incentives that stimulate competition among teachers for individual bonus pay rewards. A similar dynamic played out in South Africa, where a peer feedback initiative designed both to help teachers develop personal professional development plans and inform the award of performance pay bonuses led to little substantive feedback and teachers giving each other perfunctory positive reviews.

But there are significant positive examples, demonstrating that trust can be built from many different quarters. Most notable is the work of the NGO STiR, which started with 25 teachers in Delhi in 2012 and now supports tens of thousands of teachers in different Indian states and Africa. STiR’s mission is to reignite teachers’ intrinsic motivation by linking them into cross-school support networks and providing ongoing coaching support. Another example is the “Quality Educators” programme sponsored by the international teachers’ union Education International, which encourages teachers to video each other’s lessons and discuss them, sharing suggestions for improvement. Beyond trust, teacher collaboration at the school level—or across schools—requires time in the school day for structured interaction, and, ideally, supportive coaching.

Bringing teachers together to share practice is also, as one interlocutor observes, a subtle accountability mechanism. But it is one that respects and encourages teachers’ professionalism, rather than the formulaic classroom visits by supervisors that interlocutors observe are so common, yet wholly ineffective at improving practice.

Reforming the curriculum. Several interlocutors observe that the success of high-performing education systems reflects deep—and continuing—thought about the purpose of education: what competencies and values do all children in a globalised 21st century need to develop? And how, in turn, can we prepare teachers to impart these? The record of curriculum reform across the world is fraught; there is typically strong pressure to add topics, rather than streamline, and socio-cultural fissures on gender, religion, ethnic diversity, and history are often exposed. And there is no shortage of countries—Vietnam being one example—that adopt education buzzwords such as “critical thinking skills” in the absence of political appetite for critical thinking. Indonesia’s 2020 curriculum reform and Peru’s reform in 2016 are examples where recent curriculum reforms have prioritized foundational learning and continuous, school-level assessment to reduce the stakes around end-of-cycle examinations. Both reforms also view the work of schools as developing not only academic competencies, but also socio-emotional skills and values (respect for diversity, inclusion and gender

On lesson study, see remarks from interlocutor Maria Teresa Tatto in [Chapter 11](#).

On lesson plans in Vietnam, see remarks from interlocutor Joan DeJaeghere in [Chapter 3](#), as well as the discussant essay by Vu Dao and Khoa Vu in [Chapter 16](#).

On textbooks in Finland, see remarks from interlocutor Lucy Crehan in [Chapter 6](#).

On collaboration and competition in Chile, see remarks from interlocutor Verónica Cabezas in [Chapter 2](#).

On peer feedback in South Africa, see remarks from interlocutor Melanie Ehren in [Chapter 10](#).

On STiR Education, see remarks from interlocutor and STiR founder Sharath Jeevan in [Chapter 4](#). See also <https://stireducation.org/what-we-do/>.

On Quality Educators, see remarks from interlocutor Juliet Wajega in [Chapter 13](#).

On peer collaboration among teachers as a subtle accountability mechanism, see remarks from interlocutor Barbara Tournier in [Chapter 13](#).

On reform in Indonesia, see https://neqmap.bangkok.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/PPT-Susan_Rahmawati_Curriculum-Learning-and-Assessment-Reform.pdf.

On reform in Peru, see Saavedra, J., & Gutierrez, M. (2020). Peru: A Wholesale Reform Fueled by an Obsession with Learning and Equity. In F. M. Reimers (Ed.), *Audacious Education Purposes: How Governments Transform the Goals of Education Systems* (pp. 153–180). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41882-3_6.

equality, environmental awareness). Both view a “growth mindset” and capacity for productive teamwork as critical for the 21st century workplace.

Improving the basics: school infrastructure and system management.

Spending on school infrastructure is one of the most politically attractive and visible forms of education spending, and most countries have a history of overspending in this area—often to politically connected contractors—which crowds out more productive spending on teachers, books, and materials. However, there is increasing evidence that sound spending on school buildings, sanitation, electricity, libraries, and ICT broadband—particularly in the most rural and disadvantaged areas—can contribute to education results, including by making schools more attractive to higher quality teachers and by guaranteeing more reliable ICT functioning. In countries such as Peru, Vietnam, Chile, and Ecuador, well-managed, equity-enhancing investments in closing the infrastructure gaps across regions and neighbourhoods appear to be contributing to more equitable learning gains. Another increasingly common feature is smart environmental design, which uses solar energy, local materials, and special designs for flood, mudslide and earthquake zones. Peru’s school designs for communities in the Amazon basin have won an architectural award.

Connections with the community. Minister Nadiem Makarim of Indonesia has observed that while the overall impacts of the COVID pandemic on education have been devastating, one positive by-product has been to bring many parents into closer contact with their children’s schools, teachers, and—with remote learning—the instructional process. Making sure that parents understand and support their children’s education is key for successful schools. Effective programmes to raise school quality make it a priority to engage parents and the community as full partners. India’s Pratham starts the school year with melas, or fairs, that bring parents into the schools, in some cases for the first time. Colombia’s Escuela Nueva from its beginning in the 1970s organised the curriculum around activities that connected students with their community (for example, taking oral histories of the oldest members of the community and doing community environmental projects), all designed to ensure that education was locally relevant and the school a locally engaged and respected institution. The global NGO Teach For All describes its mission as working with parents and communities to “co-create” a vision of student success that is rooted in the local context, history, and values and an understanding of the local pathways to opportunity and challenges facing kids, as well as global aspirations.

Teachers’ voice and buy-in. No education policy or programme can raise student learning unless it positively affects teacher-student interaction in the classroom. A fundamental fact of school systems is the decentralised structure and “opacity of the classroom”, which makes it difficult for reformers to monitor teacher practice at the classroom level. Thus, teachers’ buy-in is critically important for the implementation of new curricula, new teaching practice, teacher collaboration, and even the integrity of school-level learning data. One message of this book is that while explicit teacher voice in education policy and reform design is relatively rare, it is powerful.

On improving the basics, see León, G., & Valdivia, M. (2015). Inequality in school resources and academic achievement: Evidence from Peru. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 40, 71–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2014.11.015>. Murillo, F. J., & Román, M. (2011). School infrastructure and resources do matter: Analysis of the incidence of school resources on the performance of Latin American students. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 22(1), 29–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2010.543538>.

On school design for the Amazon basin, see “Plan Selva” (<https://currystonefoundation.org/practice/plan-selva/>), “Scaling appropriate furniture for public schools” (<http://hadzich.com/p07.html>), and “El aula llega en piezas a la selva” (<http://hadzich.com/pr/planselva/planselva.pdf>).

For more on Teach For All, see remarks from interlocutor Wendy Kopp in [Chapter 5](#).

Interlocutors point to the importance of policymakers listening with empathy to teachers' grievances and the issues they contend with daily—from African teachers who must walk long distances to their schools due to the lack of housing and transport, to Pakistan's rigid schedules for in-service training which mean teachers must bring their own children to the sessions and child-care competes with their attention to learning new skills. Teachers' unions are increasingly organising sessions focused on national education policy and using SMS platforms to capture teachers' questions and reactions. Savvy education leaders are also doing so: Brazil's Claudia Costin's first act as education secretary in Rio was to establish a Twitter feed to communicate with her 50,000 teachers, and she made a point of highlighting and responding to questions and feedback—especially criticism. Peru's Minister Jaime Saavedra sent personal emails to all 350,000 public sector teachers on his first day in office, congratulating them for their work and establishing a direct email connection. In designing a major reform of the teaching career (see next section), the Peruvian Ministry established an SMS platform soliciting teacher suggestions and comments. Perhaps the best example is the national commission of teacher union representatives, civil society leaders, and education officials that designed Chile's 2004 national teacher standards and teacher evaluation system, which anchor the education system to this day.

Raising teacher quality and prestige. The ultimate challenge for countries seeking to raise learning is the most complex: raising the talent and motivation of teachers. The animated discussions in this book make several things clear. First, teacher talent is multidimensional. As more studies begin to measure students' socio-emotional skills (perseverance, teamwork) as well as academic outcomes, it is becoming clear that great teachers and schools produce important results in the former domain as well as the latter, and the two are not always synchronous. So, finding ways to screen for, evaluate, and reward the complex skills teachers need is a huge challenge.

Equally complex is teacher motivation. There is consensus across the interlocutors in this book that nearly all teachers are motivated by an "intrinsic" desire to help children, but they are equally clear that the "teacher as hero" model is unfair and unsustainable. Countries must make sure that overall teacher compensation is competitive with other skilled sectors, and, just as importantly, create a career path that allows classroom teachers room for professional growth, expanded responsibilities and increased compensation over a decades-long career. Most crucially, countries must shift from a clientelist civil service model where teaching posts and promotions are political commodities, to a meritocracy where teacher hiring and promotions are governed by clear competency standards and transparent evaluation processes, and, as in any other sector of the economy, teachers can be separated from the civil service, for consistent poor performance.

This is politically contentious, especially in democratic countries where the large bloc of votes represented by teachers' unions can determine election outcomes. It is also technically complex, as it requires the development of teacher standards, competency tests, and other evaluation processes (increasingly including observation of teachers' classroom practice) for all levels and disciplines of the profession. It has

See remarks from interlocutor Kwame Akyeampong in [Chapter 12](#).

See remarks from interlocutor Soufia Siddiqi in [Chapter 8](#).

See <https://vejario.abril.com.br/cidade/claudia-costin-secretaria-municipal-de-educacao/>.

See Jackson, C. K. (2018). What Do Test Scores Miss? The Importance of Teacher Effects on Non-Test Score Outcomes. *Journal of Political Economy*, 126(5), 2072–2107. <https://doi.org/10.1086/699018>; and Jackson, C. K., Porter, S. C., Easton, J. Q., Blanchard, A., & Kiguel, S. (2020). School Effects on Socioemotional Development, School-Based Arrests, and Educational Attainment. *American Economic Review: Insights*, 2(4), 491–508. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aeri.20200029>.

Also, on the question of how to gauge teachers' own non-cognitive skills and the impacts on students, see an innovative study from Cheng, A., & Zamarro, G. (2018). Measuring teacher non-cognitive skills and its impact on students: Insight from the Measures of Effective Teaching Longitudinal Database. *Economics of Education Review*, 64, 251–260. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2018.03.001>.

taken years for countries such as Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Ecuador and leading states in Brazil to develop and refine these instruments and processes. An Indonesian interlocutor notes that in that country, the creation of a certification process without the underlying technical work to make it a meaningful screen for teacher competence produced a reform that has had no impact on teacher quality or student learning. This is also the conclusion of a recent study from the US; many states have introduced new processes to evaluate teacher quality that lack the technical heft, comprehensiveness, and expert implementation that made Washington DC's "Impact" teacher evaluation system a notable success in producing a system-wide shift in teacher quality.

An interlocutor from Ghana describes the issue that can plague systems in trying to raise the standards for teacher hiring: the high standards of the new teacher licensing exam have produced a low pass rate, creating consternation among candidates who have a bachelor's degree yet cannot qualify for a full time, civil service teaching job. The jolt of introducing substantially higher academic standards into a teacher entrance exam, resulting in low pass rates and leaving a large share of public sector teachers on temporary contracts, has also been the experience in Peru since 2015. It points to the need for complementary efforts to attract high-talent students into teacher education, such as the Chilean NGO Elige Educar's campaigns to raise the social profile of teaching. The global NGO Teach For All has given the world a gift by demonstrating in over 60 countries across the world that there is a latent supply of academically talented students attracted to the core mission of bringing education quality to their countries' least advantaged students and ready to dedicate several years of their lives to working in education—even in education systems where overall compensation and system functioning are not an attractive long-term career proposition.

Creating education systems that offer a country's most talented students attractive, life-long careers in teaching is what the world's highest education performers—Finland, Singapore, Japan, Korea, Canada, Estonia—have accomplished, in most cases over decades. This has also been the direction of reforms in Latin America over the past fifteen years. Chile's Elige Educar helped design a major reform (Chile's 2016 teacher law) to improve the pipeline into teaching by raising the standards for entry into teacher training schools and regulating institutions' quality more closely. None of this is easy, technically or politically. But research from Peru, Mexico, and Washington, DC shows that it is possible to establish entrance tests that screen for teacher quality in a meaningful way, and that over time this can raise the quality of the teaching force. When combined with incentives for better-prepared teachers to work in the most disadvantaged rural areas, some impacts on student learning can be seen in a relatively short period. But in general, policymakers must be prepared for a long haul: in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru it has taken more than a decade to see overall shifts in who becomes a teacher, how motivated they are to remain in the profession, and national level improvements in student learning. And in other countries, such as Mexico, it has proven politically impossible to sustain reforms long enough to reap these rewards.

On certification in Indonesia, see remarks from interlocutor Shintia Revina in [Chapter 7](#).
On teacher evaluation in Washington DC, see Bleiberg, J., Battistin, E., Harbatkin, E., Kraft, M. A., & Springer, M. (2021). The Effect of Teacher Evaluation on Achievement and Attainment: Evidence from Statewide Reforms. *EdWorkingPaper*, 21–496. <https://doi.org/10.26300/B1AK-R251>.
Dee, T. S., James, J., & Wyckoff, J. (2021). Is Effective Teacher Evaluation Sustainable? Evidence from District of Columbia Public Schools. *Education Finance and Policy*, 16(2), 313–346. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00303.

On teacher licensing in Ghana, see remarks from interlocutor Kwame Akyeampong in [Chapter 12](#).

For more on Elige Educar, see remarks from interlocutor Verónica Cabezas in [Chapter 2](#).

Hanushek, E. A., Piopiunik, M., & Wiederhold, S. (2019). The Value of Smarter Teachers: International Evidence on Teacher Cognitive Skills and Student Performance. *Journal of Human Resources*, 54(4), 857–899. <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.54.4.0317.8619R1>.

On Peru, see Bertoni, E., Elacqua, G., Méndez, C., & Santos, H. (2020). Teacher hiring instruments and teacher value added: Evidence from Peru (Working Paper IDB-WP-01199). IDB Working Paper Series. <https://doi.org/10.18235/0003123>.
On Mexico, see Estrada, R. (2019). Rules versus Discretion in Public Service: Teacher Hiring in Mexico. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 37(2), 545–579. <https://doi.org/10.1086/700192>.
On Washington DC, see Adnot, M., Dee, T., Katz, V., & Wyckoff, J. (2017). Teacher Turnover, Teacher Quality, and Student Achievement in DCPS. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(1), 54–76. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373716663646>.

Interlocutors in this volume also caution that the challenge of raising learning outcomes cannot be met only through new teacher recruitment; important actions are also needed to raise the skills and motivation of existing teachers. This is surely true. But, as noted above, while providing more effective in-service training is a key challenge, encouragingly, there is growing evidence on how to do it.

In many countries the need to hire additional teachers over the next decade will be intense. Many low-income countries are still striving to universalise pre-school and secondary education, and in middle-income countries that expanded these levels decades earlier, large cohorts of teachers are reaching retirement. What is essential is to recognise that teachers hired today will anchor the education system for the next several decades. There is a huge payoff to the hard political and technical work of ensuring that career incentives and the selection process attract and reward a country's academically talented individuals.

Summing up: the power of school culture

Anyone working in education knows that within seconds of entering a school, there is a palpable sense of an organised, purposeful, respectful culture—or its absence. In the most impoverished and distressed environments, good schools are especially important, providing children a place with the safety, order, nutrition, and care that are prerequisites for learning. One interlocutor describes such a school in Palestine, **“where about two-thirds of the fathers are either dead or in prison or just not present in the lives of their kids. And yet this school was just magical—somehow it was able to be a high-functioning school in the midst of a warzone.”** Yet that school was part of a broad survey of service delivery across countries in the Middle East and North Africa which found that even with very similar “formal” rules for school performance, something as basic as teacher attendance could vary from 20 percent to 80 percent across different schools.

This heterogeneity is a reality of every school system and has prompted substantial research and thinking not only about the structures and incentives that operate on schools but also on the role of school leaders in navigating them. Schools as entities are “nested” in broader systems—of civil service rules for hiring personnel, an inspectorate that determines how “quality” is judged and monitored, a financing system which determines the level of resources, and the community of parents from which students are drawn. One interlocutor describes classrooms as the centremost of a set of Russian dolls. Using that analogy, the range of country examples in this paper provoke reflection on how the relative size and shape—and implicitly, the degree of influence—of the outer dolls differs from country to country.

In some countries, the overall civil service culture predominates, including the selection of school leaders as political favours. Several interlocutors in this volume describe the negative impacts of school directors and system supervisors appointed through political connections rather than merit. These individuals may

See remarks from interlocutor Michael Woolcock in [Chapter 10](#).

Brixi, H., Lust, E. and Woolcock, M. (2015). *Trust, Voice and Incentives: Learning from Local Success Stories in Service Delivery in the Middle East and North Africa*. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-0456-4>.

See remarks from interlocutor Michael Woolcock in [Chapter 10](#).

lack the leadership skills to create a strong, positive school culture. They may lack the instructional skills to provide teachers with useful guidance. Worst of all, their politics-driven tenure makes them immune to consequences for poor performance and at risk of being replaced in the wake of elections despite good performance.

Increasing research in developing countries is consistent with earlier research from the US finding that school principals have substantial power to shape their school's culture, functioning, and students' learning and other outcomes. This research suggests that classroom teachers as the innermost of the Russian dolls are impacted most profoundly by the next level doll—the school environment. Continuing their work with Nicholas Bloom using a standardised measure of management quality, Leaver, Lemos, and Scur found that school management practices across 65 PISA countries were significantly correlated with schools' test scores; the differential impact of school leaders in the bottom 25 percent versus the top 25 percent of the management quality distribution on school performance was equivalent to three months of learning. Randomised evaluations in Tanzania and Senegal have similarly found that schools with stronger leadership are better able to utilise school grants and performance incentives and appear to do it by focusing on the quality and performance of their teachers.

Teach For All's focus on developing “teacher leaders” has in many countries produced a new pipeline of high-impact school directors after corps members complete their two years in the classroom. Initiatives such as the NGO Global School Leaders tackle the challenge of grooming school leaders directly and are expanding support to countries in re-defining the roles and building the skills of networks of school leaders. Reforms in Peru, Ecuador, and states in Brazil have included major changes in the way school leaders are selected, supported, and evaluated. Crucially, this has meant a shift from political appointment of school directors, district, and regional supervisors to merit-based appointment processes.

School leaders are a critical point of leverage in any school system, and in the best of cases can create the trust among teachers needed for peer collaboration, the parent outreach and links with the community needed to work together in the interests of students, and the ability to navigate the bureaucracy above in the interests of the teachers and students below. There are significant challenges in identifying potential leaders through meaningful selection processes, ensuring them the power to reshape their team of teachers, and guaranteeing the resources they need to do their work. But school visits across scores of countries and education systems have convinced me that every high-functioning school in a low-performing system has an effective school leader at its centre.

A characteristic story is that of a director who transformed a failing school with 40 students in one of Rio de Janeiro's worst slums into one of municipality's highest performing schools, with an enrolment of 500 and a waiting list of 100 more. How did she do it? “It was not fast ... It took six years.” She started by spending weeks in classrooms observing every teacher in the school. “I treated the best as precious

On the US, see Branch, G. F., Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2012). Estimating the Effect of Leaders on Public Sector Productivity: The Case of School Principals (Working Paper No. 17803). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w17803>. Herman, R., et al. (2017). School leadership interventions under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence review: Updated and expanded. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1550-3.html.

Leaver, C., Lemos, R., & Scur, D. (2019). Measuring and Explaining Management in Schools: New Approaches Using Public Data. RISE Working Paper Series. 19/033. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2019/033/.

On Tanzania, see Mbiti, I., Muralidharan, K., Romero, M., Schipper, Y., Manda, C., & Rajani, R. (2019). Inputs, Incentives, and Complementarities in Education: Experimental Evidence from Tanzania. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 134(3), 1627–1673. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjz010>. On Senegal, see Carneiro, P., Koussihouédé, O., Lahire, N., Meghir, C., & Mommaerts, C. (2020). School Grants and Education Quality: Experimental Evidence from Senegal. *Economica*, 87(345), 28–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecca.12302>.

On Teach For All, see <https://teachforall.org/news/alumni-journeys-meet-two-school-leaders-bold-visions-their-students>, and Chapter 5 for an interview with Teach For All co-founder Wendy Kopp.

On Global School Leaders, see <https://www.globalschoolleaders.org/>, and Chapter 17 for an essay by Global School Leaders co-founder Sameer Sampat.

jewels and the weaker but good ones as my personal project to develop.” And the worst ones? Since they could not be fired, “I made their life hell” until they transferred. After that, teacher absence declined and teachers began to work as a team, sharing lesson plans and supporting each other, which gave her time to work with parents and the community on restoring the building, developing extracurricular programmes, and dealing with the administration, which initially wanted to close the school. As the school’s reputation improved, everything became self-reinforcing; good teachers wanted to work there; parents and the community supported the school. But the transformation required skilled leadership and years of effort.

Effective school leaders provide answers to the two questions posed at the outset. They have the ability to recognise “great teachers” and to guide the work and stimulate the professional growth of “good enough” teachers. And they build a school culture where every student is valued and their learning progress and socio-emotional growth are the shared focus and celebrated achievement of everyone who works there.

This fascinating book provides a range of perspectives and insights into the work of teachers, leaders and schools across the world. We hope that—no matter how much you already know—it enriches your understanding of global education.

As if to underline the importance of school leadership, after that principal left the school, its results declined more quickly than they had risen.

Foreword

Lant Pritchett

Introduction: The struggle to profess purpose amid competing pressures from selves, situations, standards, and society

Yue-Yi Hwa

On autonomy, equity, democracy, and building a granular understanding of teachers' experiences

Verónica Cabezas & Jessica Holloway

On individual agency, societal norms, contradictions, and teachers' thought processes

Joan DeJaeghere & Shwetlena Sabarwal

On motivation, management, measurement, and the invisible thread between student and teacher

Dan Honig & Sharath Jeevan

On informal norms, school culture, and why we need to change mindsets (including our own)

Margarita Gómez & Wendy Kopp

On unrealistic curricula, improving teaching amid resource constraints, and the sweet spot between autonomy and support

Lucy Crehan & Katlego Sengadi

On respect, recruitment, unrealistic expectations, and treating teaching as a specialised profession

Belay Hagos Hailu & Shintia Revina

On competing value systems, socioeconomic challenges, and what it means to be a good teacher

Yamini Aiyar & Soufia Anis Siddiqi

On culture, politics, religion, and top-down influences on educational priorities

Masooda Bano & Ying-yi Hong

On varied perceptions, gradual change, and how norms are nested in different levels of the system

Melanie Ehren & Michael Woolcock

On accountability, teacher professional development, and the value and challenge of strengthening professional norms

David Evans & Maria Teresa Tatto

On socialisation, standards, support, and changes in the status and scale of the teaching profession

Kwame Akyeampong & Luis Crouch

On re-professionalisation, collaboration, teacher voice, and balancing accountability and support

Barbara Tournier & Juliet Wajega

On habit formation, reference networks, and deliberate practice in the complex craft of teaching

Alice Cornish & Mike Hobbiss

On teacher standards, public recognition, professional incentives, and varied (and changing) expectations

Laura Savage & Carlos Vargas Tamez

A reflection on social norms on teachers in Vietnam

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The influence of schools in shaping teacher norms

Sameer Sampat

Teachers as the key to global learning progress

Barbara Bruns

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