

Teacher Training: What Works and What Doesn't Innovations and Trends in Latin America^{*}

Juan Carlos Navarro and Aimee Verdisco

Achieving successful teacher training is highly sensitive to individual contexts, making perennial formulas hard to find. However, six trends in innovation in teacher training have been identified as being common denominators and operating principles in eight best practices case studies. Technology can be a valuable resource to improve and strengthen activities related to some of these trends. For example, courses taken through the Internet can allow teachers to continue with their in-service teaching education at their own pace and on their free time. By sending e-mails and participating in chat rooms, teachers belonging to Brazil's Accelerated program and Peru's PLANCAD exchange ideas, discuss common difficulties and solutions, and networks are able to extend across borders. Teachers can also watch best practices and problems through videos, as the CAPACITAR teachers do on a weekly basis during special meetings designed for teacher discussions.

In an effort to capture these innovations, the Education Unit of the Inter-American Development Bank, with the support in some cases of other sponsors, commissioned the following eight case studies:

- ? Teacher training in the context of the Accelerated Training Program, a privately initiated program applied in the school systems of several Brazilian states and municipalities (Oliveira, 1998).
- ? The Program for the Continuing Education of Teachers (PFPD), developed and managed by the school system of Bogota, Colombia (Chiappe and Zuluaga, 1998).
- ? The *microcentros* for teacher training in rural schools in Chile (Williamson, 1998).
- ? Teacher training in the context of the Educational Technology Program in Costa Rica, a collaborative effort between the Omar Dengo Foundation and the Ministry of Education (Anfossi and Fonseca, 1999).
- ? The Regional Center for Higher Education-ESTIPAC, in Jalisco, Mexico (Limón, 1998).
- ? The Regional Centers for Teachers, post-secondary institutions providing a new, intensive program of teacher training in Uruguay (Castro, 1999).
- ? Teacher training in *Fe y Alegría*, a private, publicly supported network of Catholic schools for poor children in Venezuela (Pérez Esclarín, 1998).
- ? The Teacher Training Program (*Programa de Capacitación Docente*, PLANCAD) in Peru, under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education (Instituto Apoyo, 2000).

Based on an examination of these cases and a review of the relevant literature, we synthesize six promising trends in innovation in teacher training. These trends are common denominators and operating principles that have been identified in all or several of the cases and abstracted from their original programmatic context to become an incarnation of best practice. They are intended to provide a preliminary indication of the methods and mechanisms of teacher training that can be adapted to meet the daily challenges of improving learning in the classroom. They also have to be understood as practical responses to widely perceived failures of conventional teacher training programs—both pre-service and in-service—in Latin America; failures that affect every link in the chain of a training program, from severe shortcomings in the methods used to train teachers—most commonly, by using traditional lecturing to transmit constructivist approaches to teaching—to extremely limited impact on practice in the classroom, in spite of the substantial resources committed to the task.

* More details can be found in the technical study on which this article is based: www.iadb.org/sds/edu.

For purposes of presentation, the trends are intentionally organized. They start with the most generally accepted, applicable and incorporated in literally all programs under consideration and continue in order by decreasing degree of generality.

Trend 1: Classroom-Based Training

The literature dating from the last decade indicates that effective in-service programs are those that focus on the practical needs of teachers in classrooms. This is confirmed by our (admittedly limited) review of innovations in the region. The most basic trend shared by the cases surveyed appears to be that effective teacher training, pre-service or in-service, is classroom based. The correlation is direct: the sooner student teachers come into contact with real-life situations associated with professional practice, and the longer this contact is maintained, the more effective the training.

Emphasis on classroom practice should not be confused with the abandonment—assuming for a moment that it takes place—of good preparation in subject knowledge. As a trend, the emphasis on classroom practice injects a dose of reality into the training process. The trend contrasts not only with teacher training removed from the realities of the classroom but, above all, with the excesses of endless theoretical courses and modules of pedagogy, educational planning or related subjects that regularly consume the lion's share of teachers' time in pre- and in-service programs. The idea is one of value added: value added in terms of how to apply theoretical knowledge to concrete situations and to the students in the classroom. The emphasis on classroom practice thus complements competency in subject knowledge. It is in this respect that the trend appears in each of the innovations examined here.

Trend 2: Effective Teacher Education as Continuing Education

All the cases examined for the purposes of this paper tend to blur the distinction between pre-service and in-service training. Pre-service, as noted above, increasingly includes early immersion in classroom practice; in-service, for its part, increasingly is connected to academic institutions that reach beyond their walls to develop close relationships with schools. Two practical implications of these trends emerge:

- ? Pre-service training tends to become shorter in duration. For example, *the Centros Regionales de Profesores*, CERPs (post-secondary institutions), a pre-service program recently developed in Uruguay, trains middle and high school level teachers in three years; this compares to the four or even five years now common in most countries in the region. Rather than offering a program of 20 hours per week stretched over many years, as the traditional system does, CERP is a 40 hours per week program.
- ? In-service training becomes longer. Rather than a single event, training is seen as a continuous process. Each of the innovations examined in this study shows definite movement in this direction. Training is conceived and used as a means for developing teachers' capacity for self-reflection and professional decision-making in the classroom. Such skills lay a foundation for effective teaching. They are applicable regardless of curriculum or student population. Once developed, it is precisely these skills that are reinforced by continuous nurturing.

Trend 3: Group Training and Networking

Most of the innovations reviewed here are organized around work groups. By providing "critical friends" to examine and reflect on teaching and opportunities to share experiences associated with efforts to develop new practices or strategies, these groups—structured as teacher-to-teacher networks—become powerful learning tools. Depending on the composition of the group, the training delivered directly responds to the needs of a particular school and its teachers. For example, *Microcentros* in Chile provide rural teachers with an opportunity to exchange experiences, take on joint projects, and otherwise learn from each other. In much the same vein, rather than pulling together teachers from different schools,

training provided through the *Fe y Alegría* system engages groups of teachers in the same school. In the Accelerated Learning (Brazil) and PLANCAD (Peru) programs, teachers participate in a range of networking activities, including follow up meetings, e-mail or regular mail exchanges (both countries) and peer-directed meetings (Brazil). Moreover, for those who also have access to the CAPACITAR Program, weekly teacher-directed and focussed meetings are used to watch and discuss these videos and the good practices they present.

Trend 4: Intensive Use of Pedagogic Support and Supervision

Supervisory mechanisms lie at the heart of program success in many cases. Supervisors play an active role throughout the training exercises, and supervision, in turn, is used to provide encouragement and constructive feedback. In most instances, supervisors are former teachers, a requirement in the Brazilian, Chilean and Venezuelan cases. The benefits of this arrangement are many: teachers-turned-supervisors assume their tasks with first-hand knowledge of the classroom and of the daily challenges that teachers face. To a large extent, they are able to approach their work as peers and tutors, rather than government bureaucrats or other “outsiders” with limited knowledge and experience of the realities of the teaching profession.

These programs are making major contributions toward a radically new definition of supervision that preserves little, if any, of traditional supervisory practices so common and so often meaningless, repressive or even corrupt in most countries across the region. Under this new definition, supervisor-tutors become key sources of on-site pedagogic support for teachers, both within the school and within the community. Frequently, these new networks clash with more traditional networks of supervisors, producing debilitating effects on the effectiveness of training. Teachers participating in PLANCAD, for example, complain that insofar as regional supervisors do not share their training in new pedagogic approaches, advice regarding good practices in the classroom varies, even conflicts. This serves as a reminder of the difficulties involved with trying to move the pieces of the teacher-training machine in unison.

Trend 5: Integration of Training into the Larger Framework of Teacher Career Regulations and Incentives

Several of the innovations reviewed here include activities to restructure the role of incentives in teacher training programs. In some cases (e.g., the PFPD Program in Colombia), teachers are awarded points only after completing a yearlong training program pre-approved for content and relevancy. The perverse effect of a “point system,” by which teachers end up focusing on the accumulation of certificates with little regard for quality or relevance of the training receive, thus is offset by the strict regulation of the quality and content of the training supplied. In other cases (e.g., *Fe y Alegría* and the CERP Program), training activities are developed in a way consistent with the recruitment and selection practices of school networks.

It is worth noting that this trend crosses the line from quite universally accepted practice into the territory of less than universally accepted or adopted approaches. Indeed, in contrast to the Colombia, Venezuelan and Uruguayan programs, the Accelerated Training Program in Brazil characterizes itself as a “surgical intervention.” Operating on the “surface,” it leaves all rules and regulations governing schools and the teaching profession in place. To its proponents, this stands out as a virtue. The program can be readily applied without the need for more ambitious and politically difficult educational reforms.

These findings are consistent with our basic premise: there is no single best way to solve the complex puzzle of teacher training. What works in Catholic schools for poor children in Venezuela or in the public schools of Bogota may be neither appropriate nor relevant for municipal schools in the Northeast of Brazil where they are battling high rates of repetition. Yet, there is a common denominator. This trend points to a new sophistication on the part of policymakers to consider and apply incentives. It is underpinned and driven by a strong awareness of counterproductive outcomes that have resulted from the (often-

misplaced) incentives built into traditional teacher training arrangements. It is this awareness, not the particular approach or design of incentives, that each of the cases examined here share.

Trend 6: Training as a Response to Social And Educational Priorities at the Local Level

Several of the innovations share the common trait of being linked closely to their social and educational contexts. The *Microcentros* in Chile, for instance, were conceived at a time when urban schools were receiving strong support through channels that were not appropriate for rural schools. The CERP Program, to cite a further example, was created with the explicit objective of training teachers from and in the country's interior (see ANEP, 1999). The Accelerated Learning Program, for its part, was designed within the context of a larger project to tackle high rates of repetition and their direct consequence, the abundance of overage children in the Brazilian schools. The ESTIPAC Program is designed to meet the needs of rural schools and teachers.

Indeed, those involved in running these programs see this closeness as a key to program effectiveness. Training is effective when the challenges faced in a particular time and place are well understood, the teachers, students and schools toward which training is directed are correctly profiled, and the education system is structured in a way that lends reciprocal support (e.g., from the surrounding community) to the training activities provided.

Conclusion

Each of the programs examined here departs from the same point: a general dissatisfaction with dominant practices in teacher training. In responding to this dissatisfaction, each program combines several trends into viable and effective packages. These packages not only encompass good or new ideas in the field, most of which find support in the broader literature, but also emerge as ideas with concrete consequences on program organization, management, pedagogy and impact.

It is worth reiterating that not all trends are universally accepted. At a minimum, they serve to emphasize the fact that there are no fast and ready recipes for teacher training. The challenge is one of getting the right ingredients in every recipe. It is hoped that the trends outlined here provide some indication of what those ingredients may be.