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## TEACHERS AND THE QUALITY OF BASIC EDUCATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

**Thibaut Lauwerier**

Senior Research and  
Teaching Assistant  
University of Geneva

**Abdeljalil Akkari**

Professor  
University of Geneva

Working conditions of  
teachers

Teacher training

Lessons from research and  
the way forward

The issue of quality in basic education in sub-Saharan Africa is inseparable from the quality of the teachers involved. From a review of the literature produced since 2000 in English and French, the present appraisal considers the position of these teachers in terms of changes both in their working conditions and their training. It reveals that they work in tough conditions with typically little job security, poor pay and loss of motivation. It also demonstrates that both their pre-service and in-service training are superficial and inadequate and thus have little bearing on classroom practice. Meeting these two major challenges is vital in achieving any improvement in the quality of basic education in sub-Saharan Africa.

## 1. WORKING CONDITIONS OF TEACHERS

The sensitive and crucial issue of teachers' working conditions is at the heart of any examination of the quality of basic education in sub-Saharan Africa. A review of the literature produced since 2000 does indeed confirm that work in teaching has become increasingly insecure, even though teachers are regarded as the mainstay of quality in basic education. This growing lack of security is the outcome of two policy developments in the 1980s and 1990s with powerful repercussions common to many African contexts, namely the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and the massive increase in school enrolments driven by international action to achieve education for all (EFA).

As regards the SAPs, first of all, their aim was to put straight the financial position of African States after a period of successive economic crises. The leitmotif of the SAPs, which were promoted in particular by the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), was the rationalization of public expenditure, including expenditure on education. Policy measures were thus introduced to the detriment of teachers and their working conditions (Barro, 2008; Lauwerier, 2013).

Furthermore, in the 1990s and then from 2000 onwards, very many teachers were recruited in response to the huge increase in enrolments spurred on by enthusiasm for the aims of EFA. However most countries then faced a twofold problem involving not just a shortage of teachers, given that the continent was expected to create some 2.3 million new posts by 2030 (UNESCO-UIS, 2014), but also limited financial support. Countries thus introduced policies to lower their labour costs while simultaneously creating new and often administratively decentralized teacher categories ("contract", "community" and "voluntary" teacher, etc.), and avoiding compliance with the international recommendations on work in this sector (Adotévi, 2008; UNESCO-BREDA, 2009). What is more, according to Traoré (2000) and Barro (2008), reliance on these new categories has been a strategy of policy-makers or teachers for avoiding unemployment, with all that this implies for quality, especially when the latter begin training.

These new teachers are referred to in most cases as "contract teachers", as their contract only lasts for a limited period of time and is often then renewed. A post as a regular teacher may be obtained in particular after acquiring further qualifications (UNESCO-BREDA, 2009). The level of job (in)security tends to depend on the degree of State involvement. For example, community teachers are the responsibility of the communities (parents) and receive no more than token remuneration most of the time. Teachers in these new categories experience very different situations depending on their country of employment, whether in terms of the length of their contract or their career plans (Bourdon and Nkengné-Nkengné, 2007). The same applies to their breakdown by status (Giorgi and Christmann, 2009); the designation of teachers on more secure contracts is unfair and tends to give precedence to urban communities rather than remote areas (CONFEMEN, 2007; Mulkeen, 2010).

As pointed out above, policies to bring down real wages in the teaching profession have been introduced in most African contexts. In the 1990s, teacher pay levels represented on average over six times the GDP per capita and accounted for up to 90% of the national education budget. As regards per capita GNP, teachers in West Africa and in particular those in the Sahel are comparatively speaking among the best paid in the world. Even bearing in mind that teacher wages have tended to decrease during the last two decades, the average wage in the Sahel countries in 2000 remained 6.4 times the GDP per capita, whereas in the rest of Africa, the corresponding factor was around 4.4 (UNESCO-BREDA, 2009). However, an Education International survey (2007) revealed that teacher wages were poor and generally below the poverty line or the cost of living.

In the English-speaking countries, wages were already relatively low, at around 5.4 times GDP per capita in the 1970s. In the francophone countries, they stood at 11.5 times GDP per capita in the very same period when they were based on the colonial model. In both contexts, they together fell to four times GDP per capita in the years after 2000 (UNESCO-BREDA, 2009). Teacher wages in francophone Africa thus deteriorated sharply. Furthermore, they differed with teacher status: in countries such as Benin or Cameroon, civil servants earn around three times more than their contract counterparts (UNESCO-BREDA, 2009). However, the distinction between contract and civil servant teachers seems to be increasingly blurred, given that their wages are moving towards similar levels and that contract teachers may after some years secure permanent State employment. However, the status of teachers employed by local communities seemingly remains insecure (Bourdon and Nkengné-Nkengné, 2007).

It should also be noted that teachers themselves are prone to unstable conditions. While they seek career progression, they will still not hesitate to leave their profession if they find better working conditions elsewhere (Sow et al., 2004; Fomba et al., 2004). In many countries, formal incentives are non-existent or counterproductive, and teachers may sometimes wait for months before being paid (CONFEMEN, 2004; UNESCO-BREDA, 2009; Tanaka, 2013). For this reason, the most qualified or experienced teachers, particularly in francophone West Africa, accept posts in other sectors that offer more attractive working conditions (Karsenti et al., 2007).

This unfavourable situation as regards wages may provoke some teachers to engage in ineffectual practices. Dladla and Moon (2013) go so far as to state that teachers are often first in the firing line of politicians and the media: for example they are collectively regarded as one of the professions in which corruption is most rife. Their absenteeism is another charge often laid against them. Thus, Mulkeen (2010) notes that teachers sometimes fail to complete the official number of hours advocated for teaching, because of unauthorized absences from work. Certain contexts may account for this absenteeism: Zambia for example, with an absenteeism rate of 60%, is also a country deeply affected by HIV and AIDS (Das et al., 2005). Furthermore, Barrett (2005) indicates the difficulties of teacher accountability in a country such as the United Republic

of Tanzania, in which the dominant approach of what should be good teaching is out of step with the real circumstances of some contexts in sub-Saharan Africa. To offset the shortfall in capacity and avoid certain practices, and on the basis of a study in the same country, Tao (2013) recommends greater teacher participation in decision-making processes.

Over and above the diminished security of teachers from the standpoint of wages, their profession also has to contend with disadvantageous teaching environments. Tilak (2009) points out that the teacher/pupil ratio (of 1/45 on average) is indeed higher in sub-Saharan Africa than in the rest of the world (1/25 on average). And this situation has only worsened since the 1990s. One of the policy options adopted in many countries in response to the challenge of pupil numbers involves the introduction of multigrade classes. The results are mixed. Unquestionably, they provide for the existence of classes in sparsely populated areas, while pupil attainment is similar to that observed in single-grade classes, teaching methods are more pupil-oriented, and they offer a cost-effective approach in adverse socio-economic contexts. However, teachers find that they have more work than in single-grade teaching and feel inadequately trained for multigrade methods, which are highly specific (Croft, 2006; Mulkeen and Higgins, 2009).

In addition, teachers do not always have the tools needed in their practical activity to cope with the lack of textbooks or their obsolete content. Of course, studies challenge the assumption that a skilled teacher must always possess textbooks, but teachers can use them effectively – for example to develop educational strategies such as pupil-centred teaching – in a way that supplements appropriate teacher training and smaller classes (Barrett, 2007). Furthermore, Michaelowa (2001) notes that, “out of all variables relating to educational materials and school facilities, the availability of textbooks in the mother tongue of pupils is the one with the most marked impact on the quality of education”.

Also worth mentioning are differences – and especially gender-related differences – within the teaching profession, in which women are generally under-represented. In 2006, women accounted on average for 45% of teachers in sub-Saharan Africa (Tilak, 2009), though with marked variations between countries, such as 14% in Chad as opposed to 65% in Niger (Bonnet, 2007; CONFEMEN, 2007; UNESCO-BREDA, 2009). These inequalities may be attributed to persistent long-standing prejudice in many countries. Married women (it is said) should remain close to their husbands and look after their family, and they also prefer to avoid the threat of aggression when working (Mulugeta, 2012). Yet it has been demonstrated that girls are more likely to remain at school when taught by women (Michaelowa, 2003b; World Bank, 2005).

Regional differences also have an impact on the working conditions of teachers. The profession faces greater challenges in rural communities, especially as regards the deployment of teachers, their staffing levels, absenteeism and working hours, and educational follow-up (Lewin, 2004; Mulkeen, 2005; Bennell and Akyeampong, 2007). However, some studies such as the one by Bennell and Mukyanuzi (2007) in the United Republic of Tanzania reveal that teacher satisfaction is higher in rural than

in urban communities. This is due in particular to the higher cost of living in big towns and cities, and to a lack of ties with the surrounding urban environment.

Finally, it is important to consider the issue of motivation. Extensive data on the profession in sub-Saharan Africa have focused on the low level of teacher satisfaction (Michaelowa, 2003a; Bennell and Akyeampong, 2007). The decrease in wages in Africa has had a harmful effect on the quality of education, by demotivating teachers and particularly those who are experienced and have worked for a long time (CONFEMEN, 2004). In addition, a lack of career prospects has an adverse effect on their job satisfaction. While in South Africa, career development is officially a clearly stated principle, not all teachers at work are eligible for it (Quan-Baffour and Arko-Achemfuor, 2013).

According to the research done by Michaelowa (2002) or Pontefract, Bonnet and Vivekanandan (2013), job satisfaction is a complex issue involving more than wage-related issues. A supportive environment, societal respect and the ability of teachers to make themselves heard at national level may be just as important. Many studies have pointed to the vital part played by their integration within the community and the recognition granted them, especially by parents, as motivating factors (Bennell and Akyeampong, 2007; Nishimura et al., 2009). The research of Mpokosa and Ndaruhutse (2008) demonstrated that the role of school head was vital in improving teacher management and motivation. Similarly, other studies emphasize the beneficial effect on teachers of receptive forums in which they can express themselves (Belay et al., 2007). Staff friendships (Hedges, 2002) or warm interpersonal relations between teachers and pupils (Kouraogo and Ouedraogo, 2009) may also help to keep teachers in schools in remote areas. By contrast, policies concerned with financial incentives have had a negative impact from this standpoint in Zimbabwe, creating tension between colleagues (Ndlovu et al., 2014).

The weak motivation of teachers in this context compromises the quality of their activity and has led to institutional instability in many countries, with repeated strikes and “wasted” school years (Welmond, 2002; Lauwerier, 2013). A study carried out in South Africa also revealed the negative impact of strikes on learning, particularly among the most deprived pupils (Wills, 2014).

Finally, Buckler and Gafar (2013) conducted research on teacher morale over a four-year period in a rural region of Ghana. One of its findings was that training partly improved their morale, in particular by giving them a sense of professional identity as teachers. On the other hand, teachers who lack the ability needed to improve the attainment of their pupils are affected by this shortcoming.

In conclusion, we consider that the teaching profession in Africa is caught in the tension between two vital and equally important concerns. The first relates to macroeconomic stability and the need for countries in the region to exercise sound control over their budgets. The second consists in determination to ensure that the daily conditions of teachers satisfy the minimum standards for them to work. Yet these two

goals are contradictory, since the first engenders insecurity or contractual employment, which has an adverse effect on the attractiveness of the profession and teacher motivation.

## 2. TEACHER TRAINING

The second area of enquiry focuses on the low level of teacher training in sub-Saharan Africa, which holds back any improvement in the quality of basic education.

As already discussed, this problem is linked to the political options preferred during these recent decades, and in particular the SAPs which resulted in the early retirement of qualified teachers (Lauwerier, 2013). The SAPs also caused the closure and/or restructuring of teacher-training schools (Samake, 2007), so that the intake of these centres is drawn primarily from the region in which they are located (Akyeampong, 2003).

First of all, prospective teachers generally begin their pre-service training with a low level of school education: over half of them, in both English- and French-speaking Africa, have reached the upper secondary level of education, though not necessarily with the final school-leaving qualification (World Bank, 2005; Bonnet, 2007), as civil servants are often selected with a pre-service higher level of school education than contract or community teachers (CONFEMEN, 2007). The selection criteria for pre-service training are therefore inadequate in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, these criteria themselves are often ill-defined (Lewin and Stuart, 2003). Thus in Mali the level of these student teachers is so low when they embark on pre-service training that there is a high dropout rate (Giorgi and Christmann, 2009). However, according to Michaelowa (2003a), with reference to the findings of the Programme for Analysing Education Systems (PASEC) of the Conference of Ministers of Education of French-Speaking Countries (CONFEMEN), the possession or otherwise of a baccalaureate by prospective teachers is not tantamount to better performance.

However, the problem consists in the fact that, for many aspiring teachers, most African education systems are unable to offer enough training courses to meet the demand for qualified schoolteachers (Lewin and Stuart, 2003).

In Africa, the majority of teachers are trained and more so in its English-speaking than in its French-speaking part (Tilak, 2009; UNESCO-BREDA, 2009). However, situations are very varied: for example in Chad, 27% of teachers have had training, compared to 36-37% in Madagascar and Togo (Tilak, 2009). In 2006 in Lesotho, 44% of teachers working in primary education and 42% of those in secondary schools had not experienced pre-service training (Education International, 2007). In Senegal, "over one-half of Senegalese primary school teachers remain untrained and the ratio of pupils per trained teacher stands around 70:1" (UNESCO-UIS, 2014, p. 19). Worse still, in some contexts, the number of untrained teachers is increasing: in Malawi in 2005, there was one qualified teacher for 83 pupils compared to 81 in 1993/94 (Nishimura et al., 2009). In other words, there is extensive reliance on teachers who are not adequately qualified. Strategies have therefore

been developed to train teachers already in service but with no pre-service training, in many countries in Africa. From the study carried out by Marphatia et al. (2010), in Burundi, Malawi, Senegal and Uganda, the number of untrained teachers is decreasing. On the other hand, the number of teachers who are under-trained and employed on fixed-term contracts has increased.

Here also, pre-service training levels tend to vary with teacher status. For example, teachers employed by a community often need no minimum training. As in the case of working conditions, qualification levels differ depending on the region: in Namibia, 40% of teachers in rural communities are qualified compared to 92% in the capital (Mpokosa and Ndaruhutse, 2008). A divide may also exist between teachers in the public and private sectors, as in Senegal: only 23% of teachers in private-sector elementary education have had professional training (CONFEMEN, 2007).

Furthermore, the countries which are furthest from achieving the EFA goals are also those in which training has been shortened the most. The pre-service training of half the teachers in anglophone African countries barely exceeds two years (UNESCO-BREDA, 2009). In some contexts especially in West Africa, it is very often even less than that (Akyeampong, 2003; Fomba and Diarra, 2003; Bourdon and Nkengné-Nkengné, 2007; Adotévi, 2008). A World Bank study (2005) bears this out and reveals the dissatisfaction of the great majority of teachers questioned about the length of their training in Burkina Faso, Niger and Senegal. Moreover, because training does not last long, teachers do not always have the resources needed to teach, even if they are fully familiar with the content of the curriculum (Najjumba and Marshall, 2013).

However, the quality of training programmes is in greater need of action than is their duration. In many countries for example, younger pupils are unable to grasp mathematical concepts or acquire the skills needed in reading, because of the inadequate pre-service training of teachers (Pryor et al., 2012; Akyeampong et al., 2013). Furthermore, in Francophone West Africa pre-service training is generally provided in French. Yet "the data show that the mother tongue of over 98% of trainee schoolteachers is not French" (World Bank, 2005, p. 53).

A discrepancy also often exists in training courses between what is expected from the curriculum and how teachers are prepared (Mulkeen, 2010; Akyeampong et al., 2011). More specifically, their training is not conducive to rethinking the beliefs that surround the profession and adopting new forms of behaviour (Akyeampong, 2002, 2003), the idea being solely to follow ministerial output to the letter (Akyeampong and Lewin, 2002). After failing to take account of the practical conditions faced by teachers, policy-makers devised reforms which required more than the latter could achieve (O'Sullivan, 2010), or which disregarded the cultural or material limitations confronting them (Harley et al., 2000).

The findings of the studies by Mtika and Gates (2010) in Malawi, Robinson (2003) in South Africa, or Schweisfurth (2002) in Gambia indicate that the appropriation and application of learner-centred education remain limited, as classroom practices have



changed little in spite of the progressive educational concepts linked to the social constructivism promoted in teacher-training institutions. According to these authors, this presupposes the need to examine relevant means and possible adjustments to ensure that this approach is rewarding.

Rather than insisting on a particular pedagogical approach, Barrett (2007) suggests moving beyond this conventional polarization and, with reference to an experiment conducted in the United Republic of Tanzania, providing teachers with a broad range of teaching techniques. Teachers or trainers more involved in thought and discussion about the curriculum would enhance the relevance of training content (Akyeampong et al., 2011). O'Sullivan (2006) and Hardman et al. (2008) even recommend that teacher trainers be involved in research, in particular into their own practice. In Uganda, teachers have developed their own empirical research to reach conclusions helpful for their activity (Heneveld, 2007).

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that those who provide pre-service training in French-speaking West Africa are not suitably qualified (World Bank, 2005). For example, in Ghana, they are more concerned to cover what is prescribed than to consider real classroom practices (Akyeampong, 2003). Teacher trainers should be able to access training throughout their professional lives to upgrade their knowledge which is often outdated (Lewin, 2004).

One way of compensating partly for the deficiency of poor pre-service training in sub-Saharan Africa would be to establish appropriate in-service training courses. Yet here again, most authors highlight the weakness or even the non-existence of such provision. In most cases, it involves short courses (lasting a few weeks, days, or possibly just hours) centrally planned by the ministry of education on precise topics, such as the introduction of new curricula. Yet alternative experimental forms exist, such as in Zambia in which local resource centres are run by teachers and training is provided in accordance with particular needs (Mulkeen, 2010). School heads who are often responsible for implementing this kind of training are inadequately prepared for the task, creating the impression among teachers that they are not really supportive. In addition, the tutors/inspectors who should regularly monitor teachers lack the material means (of transport in particular) to do so (Kunje et al., 2003). In most countries, the teacher/inspector ratio is regarded as too low: it stands at 700 teachers on average for one inspector in the English-speaking countries (Mulkeen, 2010).

Researchers have highlighted approaches to in-service training that have demonstrated a positive impact on the practice of teachers. This is so where they are more closely linked to pre-service training and adopted in the school environment, together with financial incentives and qualifications (Hardman et al., 2008, 2011; Akyeampong et al., 2011).

It is thus necessary to establish closer relations between training centres and schools, with in particular the introduction of mentoring, practical sessions and field-based courses (Welford and Mosha, 2002; Lewin and Stuart, 2003; Mattson, 2006; Bunyi et al., 2013).

In the case of either pre-service or in-service training, reliance on distance programmes seems to represent a constructive basis for action in such difficult circumstances. A World Bank research project concludes that this kind of delivery is the only realistic option in sub-Saharan Africa as, according to its authors, it can offer high-quality programmes that are sustainable and profitable at institutional or class level (Moon et al., 2005).

However, the effectiveness of such programmes still remains to be demonstrated. In spite of definite interest in distance provision and the obvious enthusiasm for it in international cooperation, Karsenti (2006) emphasizes among other things that this type of training is not necessarily more effective than conventional face-to-face provision. This is particularly so in Africa in which e-learning presupposes teaching methods that run counter to many cultures. Inadequate infrastructure and poor Internet connections in some African contexts also limit the scope for establishing distance training systems to compensate for the shortcomings of current circumstances (Karsenti et al., 2007).

Overall, it may be concluded that African teachers often find it hard to apply in practice what they have learnt during their training. Many authors who are aware of the poor quality of this training and rely partly on PASEC report findings state that the level of training may only modestly influence classroom practices, although in nine African countries studied, "the teacher effect" nonetheless represents 27% of the factors conducive to learning (Bernard et al., 2004; CONFEMEN, 2007). After training, newly qualified teachers lack the wherewithal to make lessons attractive and arouse the interest of their pupils (Lefoka and Sebatane, 2003). Teacher skills have been tested in some of the countries involved in the PASEC and SACMEQ (Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality). For example, according to the PASEC findings in Chad and Guinea, a big proportion of teachers experience difficulty in reading, writing and mathematics (Bonnet, 2007). Altinok (2013) concludes that, while in some countries the knowledge of teachers does not greatly affect student achievement, in others such as Namibia and South Africa, its impact is on the contrary very considerable and significant.

Besides training, the experience of teachers reportedly has a positive impact on their practices and therefore on pupil attainment at school (UNESCO-BREDA, 2009). But in many African countries only novices have been recruited most of the time, with no appropriate support available to offset their lack of experience (educational advisors, inspectors, etc.). On the basis of tests performed on pupils in mathematics, reading and writing, a study by Rabiou, Boube and Laouali Malam (2010) in Niger reveals that they do better when they learn with a tenured teacher rather than a contract teacher. Others play down this difference between contract and tenured teachers (Bourdon, Frölich and Michaelowa, 2007; Bourdon and Nkengné Nkengné, 2007).

Even if it is hard to measure the impact of pre-service training on teaching practice, it would seem, according to Lewin (2004), that it is a means of acquiring certain skills (the ability to plan

lessons and manage pupils and resources, etc.) and developing confidence. According to O'Sullivan (2006), effective forms of training are those that have enabled teachers to make do with their resources in such tough circumstances. In spite of the inadequacy of these resources, some teachers have indeed been capable of offering sound quality provision.

Teachers find it hard to teach in the languages of the former colony, or in the national languages, if they lack adequate training in their use, and more particularly in the use of two languages (Clegg and Afitska, 2010).

In spite of the efforts in training courses to develop pupil-centred approaches, in sub-Saharan Africa, teaching remains predominantly face-to-face with persistently strong reliance on rote learning and memorization (Hardman et al., 2012). Observation of teaching practices shows that pupils end up acting passively and develop skills classified as only modest (Dembélé and Lefoka, 2007). The findings of Pontefract and Hardman (2005) have also pointed to the predominance of rote learning and repetition without ensuring adequate understanding on the part of pupils. Furthermore, the practice reveals that teachers dispense their teaching in an uncritical manner (Akyeampong et al., 2011).

To cope with these difficulties, various strategies are emerging as in rural Eritrea, in which Belay and his colleagues (2007) have noted two categories of teachers, namely those who are "static" and the "developers" who adopt a more creative stance, and one of engagement with the community. Similarly, Barrett (2008) distinguishes between three different professional identities, although they are neither uniform nor static, among teachers in the United Republic of Tanzania on the basis of their own statements. They comprise the "relaters", the "self-improvers" and the "vocational teachers" who have had vocational training and who in turn include "gazers" and "storytellers". Thus teachers do not always abandon traditional approaches. They adopt in particular those with which they feel most confident (Nakabugo and Siebörger, 2001; Lauwerier and Akkari, 2013).

Therefore rather than judging training to be ineffectual and thus radically shortening it, it would be better instead to review critically the relevance of training programmes and more particularly the significance of their practical dimension (Bernard et al., 2004).

To sum up, this section on teacher training has pointed to several trends in sub-Saharan Africa. The first concerns the low level of school education at which teachers enter pre-service training or begin classroom activity. This raises the question of what should be the starting point of a primarily intellectual profession. The second trend, which is not unrelated to the lesser influence of the State, has been the dismantling of traditional training institutions, namely the *écoles normales* (teacher training schools), without offering an alternative means of professionalization. The third apparent trend consists in the development of in-service training programmes as a "temporary expedient". We can therefore legitimately question – like many studies covered here – the educational

added value of pre-service and in-service training which does not seem to provide the means of achieving quality teaching and learning.

### 3. LESSONS FROM RESEARCH AND THE WAY FORWARD

The foregoing analysis highlights two major concerns regarding teaching activity in sub-Saharan Africa. First, teachers too often work in difficult conditions typified by lack of job security, low wages and loss of motivation. Secondly, both their pre-service and in-service training are superficial and inadequate with little impact, therefore, on classroom practices. These two factors hold back the contribution of teachers to improving basic education in Africa. Yet the teaching issue should not be considered separately from the other aspects of school. The languages of instruction, the availability of teaching aids or supportive school and non-formal environments are just some of the matters with a bearing on the quality of basic education and, by the same token, on the work of teachers.

Of course, some authors emphasize possible ways forward through research that points to positive experience. This applies especially to the use of research into teaching practice or in-service training at the workplace.

We also consider that research should be able to increase insight into certain areas concerning teachers in sub-Saharan Africa, starting for example by offering more studies with qualitative data. As Buckler (2011) has noted, excessive importance is attached to quantitative measurements in appraising the quality of education, particularly as regards the issue of teachers. She states that we need more classroom-based observations and qualitative judgments, especially in order to understand the training needs of teachers, above all in remote areas.

Furthermore, Tao (2012) suggests rethinking research on teachers in the countries of the South, which she believes contains western centrist biases. More specifically, she thinks that, instead of seeking to understand "how can teacher quality be improved?", we should consider rather "why do teachers do what they do?". This would enable their opinions and involvement to be taken into account, and also encourage studies and strategies responsive to their complex practical circumstances.

Finally, Mulkeen, Chapman, DeJaeghere and Leu (2007) have noted four characteristics of the research on teachers in Africa: (a) it focuses as a priority on clarifying aspects of the problem, rather than devising and testing alternative solutions; (b) much of the literature tends to describe efforts to attract, deploy and retain teachers, but sound evidence for the effectiveness of the approaches described is often lacking; (c) there are too few longitudinal studies, which would enable monitoring of the effects and results of long-term action to improve teaching; and (d) some research has been conducted within projects and is only reported in the corresponding project documents and often in summary form.

Thus, by means of these various proposals, it should be possible to invert the issue somewhat and concentrate on effective and innovative practices on the part of African teachers in harsh circumstances. It is indeed unlikely in the years ahead that African governments or international cooperation will be able to invest more in basic education, attract better candidate teachers and reform pre-service and in-service training. It is therefore important to examine more closely whatever will achieve a breakthrough in quality in such situations, by laying greater emphasis on the potential ability of some teachers, rather than focusing excessively, like most studies at present, on what is not working.

Teachers are one of the mainstays of quality education, as extensive research and many recommendations have demonstrated. Yet the very concept of quality requires careful thought. More specifically – and over and above quantifiable school attainment levels – it is vital to determine whether teachers have the wherewithal to achieve education that is relevant in corresponding to the expectations and needs of pupils and their community, so as to improve learning attainment and thus contribute to national development.

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