

2017

## Teacher Voice in Global Conversations around Education Access, Equity, and Quality

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### Recommended Citation

Gozali, C., Claassen Thrush, E., Soto-Peña, M., Whang, C., & Luschei, T. F. (2017). Teacher Voice in Global Conversations around Education Access, Equity, and Quality. *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education*, 4(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.18275/fire201704011107>

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# Teacher Voice in Global Conversations around Education Access, Equity, and Quality

## **Abstract**

Despite public commitments internationally and nationally to include the voices of all stakeholders, the voices of teachers have continued to be marginalized in the literature and in policy-making related to global educational development. The purpose of the current study is to examine the process of invoking teacher voice using a sample of international teachers participating in a US-based teacher exchange program. Toward this end, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 teachers from 14 countries and four continents (all participants in the Teaching Excellence and Achievement [TEA] program). Results demonstrate that teacher voice was more personal rather than systemic, narrative rather than propositional, and utilized colloquial vocabulary rather than technical jargon. Teacher voice is also not always positive, but can be biased, critical, or judgmental. Nonetheless, the interviews also illustrate the critical necessity of including teacher voice in educational planning and decision-making.

## **Keywords**

Teacher Participation, Teacher Empowerment, Participative Decision Making, Educational Policy

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The authors would like to thank the TEA Fellows who graciously took time off their busy schedules to participate in the study and courageously share their voice with the world. In addition, special thanks to Dr. DeLacy Ganley and Eddie Partida for their support of this study.

# **TEACHER VOICE IN GLOBAL CONVERSATIONS AROUND EDUCATION ACCESS, EQUITY, AND QUALITY<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

In May 2015, global education leaders gathered in Incheon, Republic of Korea, to outline the post-2015 global education agenda (UNESCO, 2015c). The Incheon Declaration reaffirmed the international community's commitment to "establish legal and policy frameworks that promote accountability and transparency as well as participatory governance and coordinated partnerships at all levels and across sectors, and to uphold the right to participation of all stakeholders" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 9). Global education agendas developed by policymakers and international organizations such as the World Bank and UNESCO have played an integral role in driving the direction of education development since at least the 1990 conference in Jomtien. Yet while the importance of mobilizing all stakeholders has been long acknowledged, the voices of researchers, policymakers, and international organizations continue to dominate the scene, while the voices of teachers, the most important school input influencing student outcomes (Hanushek, 2011), continue to be neglected both in literature and in policy-making.

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## Purpose of Study

This exploratory study provides a unique opportunity to capture the voices of teachers from across the globe through interviews of international teachers participating in a highly selective professional development program in the United States. Specifically, we conducted semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 minutes each among 16 teachers from 14 countries and four continents in order to examine the content and nature of teachers' voice when engaged in discussions on education access, equity, and quality. The main research question we examine is: What does teacher voice sound like when applied to issues of education access, equity, and quality? As we discuss further below, we focus on these three dimensions of educational development because they provide a framework for much of the international research and planning that has followed the 1990 Jomtien Conference (Piper, Dryden-Peterson, & Kim, 2006). To provide a more holistic portrayal of teachers' voices, we invited them to share their perspectives on the progress, challenges, and innovations for each dimension. We also limited the scope of our interviews to basic formal education, from 1st to 12th grade.

We will first review the literature related to teacher voice in global educational policy and development. We then describe our theoretical framework and qualitative methodological approach. The results section is followed by a discussion on how interviews with teachers from across the globe inform conceptions of educational access, equity, and quality in a post-2015 global educational context. We conclude the discussion with implications and recommendations for policy-makers and school leaders interested in incorporating teacher voice into educational decision-making.

## Literature Review

**Definitions of Teacher Voice.** The concept of voice has been widely studied in education and non-education settings. In organizational management research, for example, voice is generally defined as the "discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning" (Morrison, 2011, p. 375). While variations exist, the concept of voice in non-education settings typically share several important features such as being an act of verbal expression, a form of discretionary behavior (i.e. one can choose whether or not to exercise their voice), and constructive in its content (Morrison, 2011).

In education, however, definitions of voice are much more varied and nuanced. As key actors in the education system, teachers (and the incorporation of their voice into decision-making) are often perceived as both the remedy and the cause of problems facing schools today (Gyrko, 2012). Teacher voice has come to represent knowledge and power, position and participation, control and collaboration, leadership and resistance (Conley, 1991; Hargreaves, 1996; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015; McDonald, 1988; Roberts & Dungan, 1993). Voice can also represent individual as well as collective action (Gyrko, 2012). While some researchers define teacher voice more generally as teachers' expressions of opinions and ideas, other researchers specify the areas influenced by teacher voice. Frost (2008), for instance, defines teacher voice as "the views, experience, and perspective of teachers on educational policy and practice" (p. 347), while Hargreaves (1996) defines it as "the place teachers occupy and the role they play in school restructuring and reform" (p. 12). Furthermore, voice does not just represent the passive expression of ideas, but also real action with real consequences. Samuel (2014), for example, employs an illustration from South Africa, in which teacher voice represented resistance to the apartheid government that resulted in strikes, physical injuries, and incarceration. The present study utilizes the definition of teacher voice proposed by Gyrko (2012) as "the expression by teachers of knowledge or opinions pertaining to their work, shared in school or other public settings, in

the discussion of contested issues that have a broad impact on the process and outcomes of education.” (p. 4).

**Teacher Voice in Education.** Many education researchers argue that there has been a shortage of teacher voice in education decision-making (Hargreaves, 1996; Ingersoll, 2007; Llorens, 1994). Ingersoll (2007) asserts that teachers exercise “very little practical control over the issues which they directly address” (p. 22). Pointing out the irony of neglecting teacher voice in education decision-making, Llorens (1994) wrote, “those most actively engaged in the transmission of socially determined knowledge are the least recognized in decisions that inform that process” (p. 3). Similarly, Heneveld (2007) argues that “current research practices leave out those who know most about schools, local practicing educators. These people are the ones expected to make changes that will improve learning, but they are not invited to contribute to deciding what is important” (p. 643). Hargreaves and Shirley (2011) also noted that teachers are often “the end-point of educational reform; the last to hear, the last to know, the last to speak. They are mainly the objects of reform, not its participants” (p. 1).

At the core of the silencing of teacher voice in education reform lies the assumption that teachers are the cause of problems facing schools today (Ingersoll, 2007). Educational policymakers may withhold trust and control from teachers because of perceived deficits in teachers’ preparation, knowledge, effort, and ability (Ingersoll, 2007). As one author notes, teachers often become “the villains to explain poor performance” in education (Samuel, 2014, p. 611). While non-practicing education researchers and policy-makers devalue teachers’ contributions to research and policy-making, teachers also become increasingly suspicious and resistant towards reform made by those in the upper levels of the education bureaucracy (Binder, 2012). McDonald (1986), however, argues that the silencing of teacher voice is the price teachers must pay in order to preserve power in their own classrooms. Nonetheless, others have argued that even the power teachers have in their own classrooms is extremely limited and heavily regulated (Ingersoll, 2007).

**Benefits of Teacher Voice.** Despite disagreements on whether or not teachers have too much or too little voice (Gyurko, 2012), there is a body of research showcasing the benefits of teacher voice for policymakers, schools, and students. When it comes to policy-making, teachers possess unique knowledge about the classroom that is key for successful policy formation and implementation (Binder, 2012; McDonald, 1988). Highlighting the importance of teacher voice for education planning and decision-making, Lefstein and Perath (2014) write, “As the adults closest to classrooms and schools, teachers possess critical knowledge and expertise about the issues under discussion and furthermore, they are among the members of the public with the greatest and most direct stake in the policies developed” (p. 33). Similarly, Frost (2008) argues that policymakers can benefit from hearing teachers’ anecdotes and incorporating their experiences in the classroom into policy-making processes. Furthermore, when teachers are involved in the policy-making process, they also become better implementers of the policy because of an increased sense of ownership and responsibility of the outcomes (Bangs & Frost, 2012; Heneveld, 2007; McLaughlin, 1987, 1990). In her study of policy implementation, McLaughlin (1987) argues for the consideration of contextual factors in macro-level decision-making as well as for more discourse between policymakers and local-level actors since “policy-directed change ultimately is a problem of the smallest unit” (p. 174). In the context of educational change and reform, teachers, as key local actors or “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 1980), exercise substantial influence on whether and how major school reforms are implemented in the classroom (Cuban, 1998). As teachers are often suspicious and even against reform, including their voice may help erode their resistance and increase their trust in those responsible for creating policy (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011).

Other studies demonstrate the benefits of incorporating teacher voice for schools and students. For example, increases in teacher voice in schools are linked to a more

clarified and unified school philosophy and a stronger overall school climate (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015; Roberts & Dungan, 1993). Teacher voice has also been linked to stronger collegiality and increased collaboration among teachers, improved cooperation between teachers and administrators, greater commitment to educational improvement and participation of teachers, and higher satisfaction with professional development opportunities (Ingersoll, 2007; Roberts & Dungan, 1993). Limited evidence also demonstrates that higher levels of teacher voice may be associated with lower teacher turnover (Gyrko, 2012; Ingersoll, 2007; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015). Higher levels of teacher voice have been associated with increased student achievement as well as fewer reports of student misbehavior (Gyrko, 2012; Ingersoll, 2007; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015). As illustrated above, when teacher voice is included in education reform, policies are more likely to be implemented as intended and result in positive student outcomes.

**Categories of Teacher Voice.** Gyrko (2012) categorizes teacher voice into three domains: educational, employment, and policy voice. Although there is a considerable overlap, his framework is helpful for organizing the literature examining the content of teacher voice. Most of the studies found on teacher voice were conducted in the United States, with only a handful of studies on non-US teachers.

**Teachers' educational voice.** Teachers' educational voice speaks on teaching and other classroom-related issues such as pedagogy and curriculum, student progress and assessment, professional development and classroom management (Gyrko, 2012). Among the three categories, teacher voice on educational issues seems to be the most prevalent. Studies of teacher voice in educational decision-making have examined teacher perspectives on matters relating to curriculum, testing, parental involvement, pre-service teacher education, pre-service reading education, school restructuring, and school management (Broemmel, 2006; Çetİn, 2013; Gratch, 2000; Gyrko, 2012; Kirk & MacDonald, 2001; Kwok, 2014; Maun & Trend, 2009; Murphy, Evertson, & Radnofsky, 1991). Teacher voice is more often consulted on matters relating to operational decisions in the classroom than on strategic school-wide issues such as student discipline, usage of school funding, course scheduling, or choosing textbooks (Conley, 1991; Gyrko, 2012; Ingersoll, 2007; Navarro, 1992). Murphy et al. (1991) indicate feeling "puzzled" by neglect of teacher voice in school restructuring efforts as there are "many reformers speaking for teachers, but few cases of teachers describing their own visions about what the schools of the future should look like" (p. 136).

**Teachers' employment voice.** Teachers' employment voice focuses on issues surrounding compensation and benefits, working conditions, scheduling, promotion, and job evaluation (Gyrko, 2012). Topics related to employment typically dominate teachers' collective voice (Gyrko, 2012). In the United States, for instance, teachers' employment voice speaks up against poor benefits, difficult working conditions, and low salaries chiefly through collective bargaining led by teachers' unions (Gyrko, 2012). While a multitude of research on the relationship between teacher salaries, especially performance pay, and student outcomes can be found (For example, Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Eide, Goldhaber, & Brewer, 2004; Firestone, 1994; Gray, Taie, & O'Rear, 2015; Hanushek, 2007; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007; Lavy, 2007; von Davier, 2011), there has been little research examining what teachers themselves think of their pay. Similarly, a host of studies have examined the relationship between teacher working conditions and outcomes such as teacher commitment and student achievement without including teachers' own voice in their research (for example, Bascia & Rottmann, 2010; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007; Horng, 2009; Kushman, 1992; Louis, 1998; SMERU Research Institute, 2014).

**Teachers' policy voice.** Perhaps the most contested category of teacher voice is teachers' policy voice, which examines topics outside of the school such as school and educational governance, state and federal funding, and statutes affecting pay and evaluation (Gyrko, 2012). As highlighted earlier, there appears to be a weakening of teacher voice in

policy relative to other stakeholders (Frost, 2008). The majority of teachers feel that their voices are not adequately heard in education policy-making (Bangs & Frost, 2012). Gratch (2000) argues that teachers are expected to implement the reforms but are “marginalized in the discourse regarding development, implementation, and improvement of reform efforts” (p. 44). Hargreaves and Shirley (2011) similarly asserted,

Teachers are at the far end of educational reform. Apart from students and parents, they are often the very last to be consulted about and connected to agendas of what changes are needed in education, and of how those changes should be managed. Educational change is something that government departments, venture philanthropists, performance-driven economics, and election-minded legislators increasingly arrogate to themselves. Even when these policy-setting and policy-transporting bodies speak on behalf of teachers, teachers often have little or no voice. Teachers are rarely asked to speak on their own account. (p.1)

While most research on teachers’ policy voice focuses on its importance for successful policy-making and implementation, there is a shortage of research examining the process of invoking teacher voice, especially when their voices are not what researchers and policymakers expect to hear (Hargreaves, 1996; Lefstein & Perath, 2014). Furthermore, the presence of strong teacher unions in the United States has arguably provided some avenue for teachers’ policy voice to be heard. Outside of the US, however, teacher unions seldom have the same level of bargaining power and, as a result, teachers’ policy voice has typically experienced even greater marginalization. Hence, the present study attempts to explore the process of invoking international teachers’ voice on education issues in their countries. We employ Piper, Dryden-Peterson, and Kim’s (2006) access, equity, and quality framework to guide our discussion on education issues, which will be discussed in the following section.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Due to the broad and often overwhelming nature of education policy discussions, Piper, Dryden-Peterson, and Kim’s (2006) access, equity, and quality framework was used to provide some structure during the interviews and to orient the discussion of teacher voice. Piper et al. (2006) defined access as the ability to “obtain a (free) seat in a classroom” (p. 2), equity as being able to obtain that seat regardless of “ethnicity, language spoken at home, gender, rural or urban location, or regional differences” (p. 2), and quality as having teachers who have had “adequate training and (a) school with sufficient supplies” (p. 2). The authors argued that rather than following a linear progression, educators and policymakers should nurture the three areas of education improvement – access, equity, and quality– in unison. As many countries have now discovered, access to schools does not guarantee that students are learning. According to the 2014 Education For All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2014), as many as 125 million children who have spent at least four years in school are still unable to read or write. In other words, addressing educational access without attention to quality and equity may result in classrooms full of children who are present but not learning.

Nonetheless, due to the finite amount of educational resources available, addressing the three areas simultaneously may be more of an ideal than a reality for most countries. Countries must often choose to prioritize one area at the cost of the other two. For example, in an effort to provide basic education to all children, many developing countries have focused on building more schools, “mass-producing” teachers, and removing barriers such as school fees and other user fees (Epstein & Yuthas, 2012). While this means increased access to education, it may also mean higher pupil-teacher ratios, lower teacher quality, and lower per pupil expenditures. In other words, progress on education access might come at the cost of education quality and equity.

While the three goals of access, equity, and quality are individually distinct, considerable overlap also exists. Providing schooling opportunities for girls, for instance, is an access goal and an equity goal. Similarly, teacher distribution—that is, who teaches where—is simultaneously a quality goal and an equity goal. Given their positions as frontline representatives of the formal education system, teachers are uniquely qualified to speak to access, equity, and quality and to the relationships among them. As we describe below, we designed our study to capture, as well as possible, the voice of teachers from around the world to explore these three key dimensions.

## Methodology

**Sample.** This study used purposive sampling of teachers participating in the 2014 Teaching Excellence and Achievement (TEA) program, a teacher exchange program funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the US Department of State. A private university in Southern California hosted the Fellows for six weeks. Out of the 18 participants in the program, only two Fellows opted out of the study, resulting in a total of 16 participants (6 males and 10 females). The Fellows represented 14 different countries: Bangladesh, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, India, Mali, Nepal, Niger, Russia, Thailand, Uzbekistan, and Zambia. Fourteen of the Fellows were secondary English teachers, while two others were secondary social science or history teachers. The teachers came from varied educational settings: nine teachers taught in public schools, five in private schools, one in a semi-private public school, and one in both a public and a private school simultaneously. The mean teaching experience of the Fellows was 15.1 years, with a range from 7 to 23 years. Eight Fellows had Master's degrees, six had Bachelor's degrees, and two had diplomas.

**Research design.** A qualitative research design was chosen because it provides an ideal platform for examining and exploring novel topics. In addition, the emphasis on “the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature” (Creswell, 2013, p. 47) fits the primary purpose of the study, which is to examine teachers' perspectives on education access, equity, and quality. Consistent with this purpose, qualitative research methods seek to “empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and participants in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to ask pre-set questions while also giving the participant opportunities to lead the conversation to his or her liking. The nature of the qualitative report also permits multiple meanings and perspectives, which is to be expected from a diverse group of teachers.

**Procedures.** IRB approval from the researchers' university was obtained prior to recruitment. Once approved, the researchers visited one of the Fellows' on-campus courses to invite participants to take part in the study. The voluntary nature of the study was emphasized, and Fellows who wished to participate were invited to sign up for 30 to 45-minute interview slots. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over a period of two weeks in either a university classroom or a meeting room at the participants' accommodations. Participants were interviewed individually, with the exception of two participants who requested to be interviewed together.

An interview protocol was developed to ensure consistency during the interview process (refer to Appendix A). The protocol consisted of 3 background and introduction questions, 3 questions each on access, equity, and quality, and 4 concluding questions. A pilot interview was conducted and revisions were made based on the feedback received. The researchers rehearsed the final interview protocol with each other to ensure consistency and flow. Interviews were audio recorded and consent was obtained from each participant prior to the start of the interview. Participants were assured of confidentiality and given the primary researchers' contact information. In each session, two researchers were present: one

was designated as the interviewer, while the other took detailed notes throughout the interview. As much as possible, notes were written verbatim. For the interview with two participants, three researchers were present: one conducting the interview and two taking notes. After each interview, both the interviewer and note-taker reviewed the tape recording to ensure completeness of the transcriptions.

**Data Analysis.** Upon completion of data collection, the researchers read transcripts multiple times in order to become immersed and familiar with the participants' voices, as recommended by Creswell (2013). Each researcher then developed a list of significant statements and codes made during each interview. Each week the list of codes was compared and grouped into larger categories. This process was repeated for several weeks, with codes being added, deducted, or re-categorized according to new data and themes that emerged. Researchers member checked codes, categories, and themes throughout analysis of the data. In preparation for this report, the themes were further categorized according to the access, equity, and quality framework. No software was used for data analysis.

## Results

The results of this study are organized according to the access, equity, and quality framework discussed earlier. Each section reports teachers' perspectives on educational progress, challenges, and innovations in their respective countries.

### *Access*

*Progress toward access.* A strong push toward education access was evident in all countries represented by the Fellows: five Fellows indicated that access was no longer an issue in their countries, while seven indicated that although some access issues still exist, their countries have made progress in increasing access to basic education. Free basic education exists in eight of the countries. Fellows from five countries mentioned that the government used incentives such as cooking oil, books, uniform, transportation, meals, and even laptops to encourage attendance. Two Fellows noted that their governments were building new schools to ensure that children, especially in rural areas, have schools nearby. In contrast, one Fellow from the Caribbean mentioned that 90% of schools in the country were privately run and charge fees that may keep larger numbers of students out of school. While one Fellow expressed dissatisfaction at current efforts to increase access, six Fellows acknowledged their governments' efforts. One Fellow from a Sub-Saharan African country remarked, "I appreciate the system here. They always have a way to keep the child at school. Maybe he or she can find their way through (the school system)." Similarly, another teacher from South Asia added that his government is "trying very hard to bring all the children to school."

*Challenges to access.* The most prominent reasons given for lack of access were 1) low levels of government investment, 2) parents' illiteracy and low educational aspirations, and 3) the financial burden associated with schooling fees. One Fellow from Latin America asserted that "the government doesn't pay a lot of attention to education. They pay more attention to other goals. But education for us is the most important thing. If people are not educated, the country will not improve." Three Fellows expressed frustration that some students still needed to walk for hours to attend school and feared how this might influence their learning. One Fellow from the Caribbean described the obstacles children in his country face in their efforts to get an education:

Students learn without anything to eat. They're hungry but they want to learn, so they fight through the hunger. How do people learn when they have no food? Some students walk 3 hours to go to school, then spend the whole day without eating, then when they go back home there may be no food.

In one country, child labor and the absence of laws to prevent it further reduces the likelihood of attending school. Two Fellows mentioned that parents' illiteracy and low levels of education also make it difficult to convince them to send children to school. One Fellow remarked that some parents did not "show interest" in sending their children to school. In addition, despite having free basic education, many children are still kept out of school by various forms of schooling fees. As one Fellow from a Southeast Asian country described, "Free education does not mean they don't pay." In sending their children to school, parents often incur ancillary costs (e.g. transportation, books, and uniform) and informal school fees (e.g. building fees, facility fees). Another Fellow from the Caribbean described what happens to students who are unable to pay the required fees: "They are told to leave in front of the whole class. If you can pay you're welcomed. If you can't you have to leave."

*Innovations to improve access.* The participants mentioned innovations and strategies implemented at the classroom, school, community, and national level – by both public and private sectors. Examples of innovations at the classroom and school level include providing needs-based scholarships and holding night classes for students who cannot attend during the day. Examples of innovations at the community and national level include conducting literacy campaigns, broadcasting educational television shows, and incentivizing school attendance. A well-known example of a parental incentive scheme is the conditional cash transfer (CCT) program, in which parents are granted cash allowances if children meet the stipulated days of school attendance or other conditions. Two Fellows, both from Latin America, however, mentioned that the policy has made teaching much more challenging due to the sudden increase in class sizes and an influx of students who are unequipped with basic academic skills. One of the Fellows described her situation as follows,

We used to have 500 students and now we have 1,000. But most of them are there for the attendance to keep getting the money. They are in the classroom but not interested in learning. They don't do the work and their evaluations are very low.

Another innovation that mobilized various levels of educational stakeholders was home visitations conducted by teachers and community members. In one South Asian country, teachers begin visiting homes two to three months prior to the start of the school year to encourage parents to send their children to school. A Latin American country established special commissions to visit families and find out why school-aged children were not in school. In one Eurasian country, the influence of the community is harnessed to increase children's likelihood of school enrollment:

The community is responsible to get families to send their children to school. Teachers will go around the community door-by-door and find out how many children there are in each household to check if there are children not in school. In each community, there is a small committee, and they will talk to the family to make sure the child goes to school. The school and community are very related. They have a lot of face-to-face contact. This happens in every community (in the country).

### ***Equity***

*Progress toward equity.* In contrast to efforts made towards increasing access, greater variance was found in the efforts made towards educational equity. Three Fellows indicated that equity was no longer an issue. Six Fellows indicated that despite some progress equity remains an issue, and five Fellows indicated that equity is a problem that has been largely unaddressed. In one South Asian country where equity was not considered a problem by a

Fellow, the Fellow noted that “every citizen has the right to take the opportunities and become an engineer or lawyer.” In contrast, one Latin American fellow gave an example of the lack of attention paid to educational inequity in her country,

(Those in government) have not thought about equality – we have the city and the rural area and they are very different. They (the government) think the same way they teach in the city will be the same way in the rural areas. They (the government) have not thought about different issues like poverty. Our (rural) parents have not gone to school. They are always working and do not write or read. Our students do not have their parents’ support. They only send their kids to write and read, and when they reach that level, they say that is enough.

*Challenges to equity.* The Fellows varied in their conceptualization of educational inequity: six Fellows mentioned gender-based inequities, nine Fellows mentioned socioeconomic-based inequities, eleven mentioned rural-urban inequities, and seven mentioned inequities between public and private schools. Only one teacher described ethnically-based inequities. Generally, there was consensus that urban schools received better equipment and teachers, and that among these schools, private schools continued to provide the best materials and instruction. While gender-based inequity typically favors boys, three Fellows mentioned that girls’ enrollment was higher than boys in their countries.

The participants attributed educational inequalities in their countries to macro- and micro-level actors. At the macro levels, structural factors resulted in discrimination of students based on location, class, or socioeconomic status. While one Fellow from Latin America remarked, “If your parents don’t have money to send you to a private school, you will not learn the same thing as the rich kid who goes to private school.” A Fellow from South Asia said, “With the democratic system in the country, the government has given power to the private institutions. They are very commercialized. If you’re rich, you can go. The poor have to send their children to the government schools.”

At the micro levels, inequities were attributed to deficiencies in the students, families, or broader cultural values. Three Fellows attributed low levels of girls’ enrollment to girls’ individual decisions. One Fellow from Sub-Saharan Africa mentioned, “Girls might feel shy (around boys) and won’t come back.” A Latin American fellow remarked, “They (girls) get pregnant because they want to establish a family and they do not want to study. They do not listen because they want to have a baby.” In addition, a Fellow from South Asia perceived girls to be less motivated than boys. Parental beliefs about gender roles may also prevent many girls from going to school. For instance, three Fellows mentioned that in large families, girls were often forced to stay home to help care for younger siblings. Another three Fellows stated that many parents consider girls’ primary role to be inside the home: cooking, cleaning, and caring for children.

*Innovations to improve equity.* Most of the strategies mentioned were aimed at gender-based, location-based, and class-based inequities. At the school-level, for example, one Fellow described how she met with parents to help raise awareness about the value of education for girls, while another shared how her private school provides professional development for teachers from public and rural schools. A Fellow from a Eurasian country described how her school provides free schooling and housing for orphans who demonstrate academic potential. At the national-level, Fellows described governments providing scholarships for economically disadvantaged students, additional teacher training for rural teachers, construction of universities in rural areas, and deployment of quality teachers to rural areas. To encourage girls’ enrollment, a South Asian country provides free education up to 12th grade for girls, while only up to 5th grade for boys. In a Sub-Saharan country,

UNICEF rewarded families who sent their daughters to school with cooking oil. This plan, however, backfired when parents took their sons out of school in order to take over the girls' chores. One Fellow also mentioned that the government was building a new school for indigenous children.

### *Quality*

*Progress toward quality.* The participants' perceptions of education quality varied in terms of their individual conceptualizations of quality. Fellows most often defined education quality as: 1) student performance on standardized national exams, 2) student and teacher autonomy, 3) high school graduation and university acceptance, 4) quantity and quality of school resources such as books and technology, and 5) teacher quality. Three Fellows believed that education quality in their country is no longer a problem. Seven indicated that their countries were making some progress in improving quality, and four indicated that quality remains largely unaddressed.

While teachers expressed concern and anxiety over student performance on national exams, there was also some criticism of the macro-level structure of testing. One South Asian Fellow indicated, "They are pressured by their parents and the culture to only study. The main flaw in (my country) is that there is too much focus on studying." Related to this concern was the concern over autonomy for both students and teachers. Five Fellows expressed that school systems should provide students with broader career options and freedom to choose their own career paths - "to go according to their choice and their inner potential." Similarly, four Fellows mentioned the need for increased teacher autonomy at school. One Fellow from South Asia said that her school gave teachers very little freedom, even dictating teachers' attire. Another Fellow spoke about the restrictions placed by upper-level decision makers on teachers:

Working conditions are good, but our decision-makers always try to impose things on us. They decide on our curriculum, etc. according to their choice. Sometimes they don't try to know the teachers' opinion. We are the ones in the field level, but our opinions are not so important to them.

Four Fellows equated quality with high school graduation rates and university acceptance rates. A Fellow teaching at a rural school in Latin America perceived the education quality at her school to be low since only 5% of the students in her high school continue to university. Seven Fellows also associated quality with conditions of classrooms, availability of books, presence of libraries or science laboratories, and technology. A Fellow from Sub-Saharan Africa described the need for more investments in learning resources, "Students don't have benches and the materials they need. The libraries are very poor. They don't have books. It's not because the system is bad, the system is good, but they need a lot of investments for schools." Eight Fellows equated educational quality with teacher quality. A Eurasian Fellow highlighted the importance of teachers by stating, "We need to improve the quality of teachers, and by doing so, will improve the quality of education in general." A Fellow from the Caribbean aptly mentioned,

Even though the government is trying to do things, it's not enough. The problem is that the NGOs can go and take care of some problems, but not solve the whole problem. They build buildings, but they don't have good teachers. The quality isn't the building, it's the good teachers and students.

*Challenges to quality.* Low educational quality was most often attributed to national education departments or local education offices, depending on the education system governance. In more centralized systems, for instance, teacher salaries and working

conditions are typically regulated by the national education office. In contrast, decentralized systems may rely on district and local offices. The main barriers to achieving high quality education can be summarized into two categories: poor learning conditions and poor teacher working conditions.

Six Fellows mentioned large class sizes hindering learning. A Fellow from South Asia stated, “It’s impossible to give the same quality of education when you have 100 students. Some students will be deprived.” Another Fellow from South Asia further described the pressure created by having to teach large and multiple classes each day. To illustrate the scope of the problem, a Fellow from Sub-Saharan Africa mentioned that the class had up to 150 students. Additionally, three Fellows indicated that the automatic promotion systems in their countries resulted in students progressing through the system without mastering academic skills and knowledge.

Teacher working conditions cited by participants included salaries, professional development opportunities, work hours, monitoring, and feedback. While five Fellows perceived their salaries to be inadequate, four Fellows felt that their salaries were adequate. Fellows who indicated that salaries were inadequate explained that they struggle to meet basic needs. A Fellow from Latin America added, “Low salary prevents teachers from getting married or having a proper livelihood.” Another Latin American Fellow mentioned that schools will purposefully manipulate teaching schedules so teachers do not qualify for full-time pay. Such schools will hire additional teachers so that they can give each teacher fewer hours while still meeting the schools’ teaching needs. In addition to the low salaries, three Fellows mentioned that their workload was unreasonable and leaves little time for professional development. Three Fellows mentioned that numerous obstacles prevented them from participating in professional development activities, including the TEA program. A Fellow teaching in a rural Latin American school described the difficulty she faced in gaining access to learning opportunities,

We have trainings, but they are in the city and transportation is tricky. It is like three hours away. They (the authorities) only give two hours of permission, but it takes three hours to get there. So you have to do it in your free time. Since we have class from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in the first shift or 10:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. in the second shift, we don’t have time.

*Innovations to improve quality.* Unlike equity and access, Fellows primarily held the public sector (e.g. Ministries of Education, District Offices, school leaders) responsible for improving education quality. Macro-level strategies to improve education quality included increasing teacher salaries, incentivizing professional development, reforming universities, and increasing national education standards. A Fellow from Eurasia, for example, mentioned how the government encouraged participation on professional development by offering 50% salary increases for teachers. At the micro-levels, strategies include conducting contests among teachers and providing teacher evaluations. A Eurasian Fellow described how her school encouraged teachers to participate in competitions: “If we take part in competition, we may not win, but those who win, they’re given extra equipment. It pushes (teachers) to high levels of professional development and gives lots of pressure.” A Latin American Fellow indicated that her school keeps teachers accountable through teacher evaluations. She also highlighted how such evaluations can keep teachers motivated in their professional development,

The biggest difference is motivation. If you know that you will not do anything in class but will still be paid every day, then you wouldn’t want to do anything. That’s what happens with the public school teachers. But in our

case, we have to try to change and improve all the time because we are constantly being evaluated by our school and by our students.

## Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine how a group of international teachers perceived issues of education access, equity, and quality in their respective countries. Based on the findings described above, the following section will discuss 1) the characteristics of teacher voice, 2) the controversies of teacher voice, and 3) the critical necessity of teacher voice.

**Characteristics of Teacher Voice.** Our findings demonstrate that teacher voice was personal rather than systemic, narrative rather than propositional, and utilized colloquial vocabulary rather than technical jargon. To use the Gyurko (2012) domains, they tended to speak more on the educational and employment levels rather than policy levels. For example, while studies have documented the pervasiveness of out-of-school children from ethnic, linguistic, and religious minority groups in several of the countries represented by the Fellows (UNESCO, 2010, a), no mention of these children were made in discussions of access and equity unless prompted by the researchers. In fact, in some cases, when asked specifically about exclusion of minority groups, Fellows denied such exclusion existed in their countries. Another example of Fellows adopting a personal, educational lens rather than a policy lens was when a private school teacher from a South Asian country stated that her country has achieved educational equity, while research has documented the contrary (UNESCO, 2015b). Her response might have been based on her own educational context rather than that of the country. In Kirk and MacDonald's (2001) study of teacher voice in curriculum reform, they also found that teachers' expertise was derived from their local contexts and experiences. While policymakers may disregard teachers' voice because of its highly personal nature, McDonald (1988) argues that is precisely what makes their voice so valuable (p. 41). Nonetheless, our finding that teacher voice occasionally contrasted with what research demonstrates differed from previous researchers who found teacher voice to be consistent with research and other sources of information (Broemmel, 2006; Murphy et al., 1991).

The character of teacher voice - whether educational, employment, or policy - was shaped by teachers' own characteristics, experiences, and qualifications. Lefstein and Perath (2014) asserted that the "possession of relevant knowledge about the issues under discussion is a key condition for productive and confident participation" and that "delegates' different educational backgrounds, exposure to unique national contexts, and prior involvement in and attention to policy issues produced different knowledge resources upon which they were able to draw" (p. 41). The Fellows whose responses were more the exception than the rule were those who possessed previous experience dealing with policy-related matters or prior knowledge regarding macro-level education issues. For example, one of the most outspoken and articulate individual in our study was a Fellow who was previously trained as a lawyer. Compared to the other participants, he was able to provide a more in-depth commentary on educational policies in his country and even argued for political reform. His knowledge of external events also allowed him to comment on issues outside his immediate context including corruption in the government and challenges facing rural schools. Several Fellows also drew from knowledge about education in their country gained during their participation in the TEA program. One Fellow from Latin America, for instance, had never known about her country's participation in international assessments such as the TIMSS and PISA. In one of the courses she attended, she learned that her country was among the lowest performers and that knowledge changed her perception of education quality in her country. Another Fellow from South-Asia, after learning about features of education in the United States, was able to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of her country's education system, and identify practices that could benefit her students back home.

**Controversies of Teacher Voice.** Previous researchers have pointed out that teachers do not always say what policymakers or reformers want to hear (Hargreaves, 1994, 1996; Navarro, 1992). Teacher voice is not always kind, beneficent, or student-centered. Rather, as our findings demonstrate, teacher voice can be biased, critical, and judgmental. During the course of our interviews, several Fellows revealed a pattern of stereotypical perceptions of students and families: girls are less motivated than boys, rural children are less interested in learning than urban children, and poor parents are less invested in education than wealthy parents. One Fellow candidly stated that girls in her country do not want to study because they just want to get married and get pregnant. While some researchers argue that voice should be constructive and directed towards the benefit of others (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Morrison, 2011; Quaglia & Lande, 2016), others argue that even seemingly negative and offensive voices are valuable (Hargreaves, 1996; McDonald, 1988; Navarro, 1992). Since teaching is ultimately “rooted in personal moral vision” (McDonald, 1988, p. 483) and teachers are individuals with “their own backgrounds, values, and biases, educational histories, and agendas” (Navarro, 1992, p. 15), it should come as no surprise that teachers do not always say what others expect them to. Hargreaves (1996) maintains that such voices “can be a source of great insight into the working lives of teachers, and the systems within which they work” and “enhances our understanding not just of these teachers, but also of our systems and ourselves” (p. 17).

**Critical Necessity of Teacher Voice.** Finally, our findings also demonstrate the critical necessity of including teacher voice in education decision-making and reform. This need to engage all levels of stakeholders in policy implementation is not a novel idea and has been advanced by multiple researchers. McLaughlin (1990), for instance, asserted that programs produced by upper-level institutions were most effective when local stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, and community members, were involved in the implementation process. She indicated that implementation consists of “mutual adaptation rather than uniform implementation, and that local factors, rather than federal program guidelines or project methods, dominated the project outcome” (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 11). Ozga (2000) emphasized that policy is not a product to be openly and naively received but involves a process of “negotiation, contestations, or struggle between different groups who may lie outside the formal machinery of official policy making” (p. 2). In a similar vein, Smit (2005) argued that teachers’ voices provide valuable local knowledge that “offer substance and deeper nuanced understandings of the complexities at the various levels of policy implementation” (p. 294). Murphy et al. (1991) further stress that, as those working directly with students every day, teachers have “a more grounded view of restructuring than do policymakers” (p. 146).

The experiences shared by three Fellows in our study illustrated the damaging impact that resulted from macro-level policies back-firing in local settings. In Sub-Saharan Africa, a donor-funded project meant to increase girls’ enrollment resulted instead in a plunge in boys’ enrollment as parents took their sons out of school to perform tasks previously done by daughters. In Latin America, a CCT policy to increase access for poor children led to a perceived decline in quality as teachers had to cope with large numbers of students who were unequipped to learn. Automatic promotion systems, found in several countries represented in the study, increased access to higher levels of education but at the expense of true learning. As the examples above demonstrate, negative ramifications from policy could be minimized if policymakers sought, heard, and included teacher voice.

### **Implications for Policymakers and Researchers**

Our experience in invoking teacher voice (especially policy voice) through the interviews confirms Lefstein and Perath’s (2014) assertion that giving voice to teachers is more complex than simply providing them with an opportunity to speak. The authors rightly assert,

Exercising voice in this context (policy discussion) often involves speaking in ways that are appropriate, and expressing ideas that one's interlocutors can understand and accept as legitimate. If speaking in such a way diverges from one's habitual ways of communicating, or demands speaking from a position in which one is not comfortable, 'having voice' in such a context may also entail compromises between what and how one would like to speak and what others are willing to hear. Voice is relational; it involves both speakers and auditors. Meaningful empowering of marginalized voices necessitates securing conditions in which speakers need not make such compromises, but rather can express themselves in their own terms, be listened to, understood and heeded. (p. 35)

In other words, in addition to opportunity, the expression of teacher voice requires the right conditions as well as reactions from authority figures. Teachers will be more likely to voice their perspective when they feel listened to, supported, and taken seriously by authority figures (ÇetİN, 2013; Gyurko, 2012; Llorens, 1994). Policymakers and researchers, therefore, must learn to be good listeners "who can hear without assuming or making early stereotypical judgment" (Navarro, 1992, p. 16).

Research generated by teachers themselves can also be another valuable source of information for policymakers and non-practicing researchers. As teachers take part as researchers, they will have more reason to take their own findings and implement solutions seriously. Heneveld (2007), for instance, describes a study in which teachers and school leaders were provided with training and tools to conduct research in their own schools. The teacher-researchers were able to identify the source of the educational problem and offer solutions that were willingly and successfully implemented in schools.

### **Limitations**

Although a majority of the Fellows were English Language teachers, some language barriers might have inhibited participants' responses during the interviews. Follow-up interviews and data checking with participants were also not feasible as the TEA program had concluded by the time data collection was completed. Furthermore, since more than one researcher conducted the interviews, there may have been inconsistencies in the delivery of the interview protocol, especially with regards to the follow-up questions asked. Sample selection may also limit the generalizability of the findings since the Fellows were part of a highly selective program and their characteristics may not be representative of most teachers in their countries. Nonetheless, Lefstein and Perath (2014) argued that such atypical representatives are often the best and most common representatives in policy discussions. Finally, we recognize that as gate-keepers responsible for determining what ideas are presented in this paper and how they are presented, we are also influenced by our own personal contexts and biases.

### **Conclusion**

As affirmed in the Incheon Declaration, a post-2015 education agenda needs to emphasize collaboration, interaction, and exchange of information among all education stakeholders. As the ones on the frontlines of the education battleground, teachers' voices deserve to be given, at the very least, as much clout as those of education researchers and policymakers. Hargreaves (1996) advocates that "all teachers' voices are worth listening to, however marginal or unfashionable they may be" (p. 16). The author provides important reasons for listening to teacher voice:

First, as a fundamental principle of humanity, all voices are worth listening to - including those of teachers. Second, as a principle of democracy within

research and policy, the voices of those whose lives are managed and assigned meaning by others deserve to be heard with attentiveness and sincerity, lest researchers mis-assign meanings to their actions, and policymakers mismanage their lives. Third, as a principle of professionalism, we should not dismiss or diminish the words and wisdom of trained individuals who stay closest to young people in school during the 15,000 hours or more of their educational lives. And finally, as a principle of sound sociology, we need to recognize that however cynically, inarticulately, or maladroitly people's voices are expressed, they often contain more than grains of real insight and 'good sense' within them. For all these reasons, hearing, representing, and sponsoring the teachers' voices should remain an important priority in educational research and practice (p. 16).

Post-2015 education reforms must recognize teacher voice as part of the solution rather than marginalizing them as the problem. As Quaglia and Lande (2016) rightly asserts, “when teacher voice is present, and you take action as a direct result of that voice, you will realize that teacher voice is not a problem at all. Rather, it’s an abundance of potential” (p. 35).

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## *Appendix A*

### Interview Protocol

#### **PART I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

1. Gender: M/F
2. Highest level of formal education: ...
3. Years of teaching experience:
4. Subjects and grade level taught:
5. Language of instruction:

#### **PART II. DESCRIPTION OF EDUCATION SYSTEM**

1. Please briefly describe the education system of your country (centralized/decentralized, governance, national examination, curriculum, etc.)
2. Please briefly describe the structure and working conditions at the school you are currently teaching in (number of schools, private/public, school governance, employment status)

#### **PART III. ACCESS**

1. What does access to basic education look like in your country? What are some challenges your country faces in increasing access to basic education? What are the characteristics of out-of-school children in your country, if any?
2. What measures have been taken by your country to increase access to basic education? Were these efforts successful?
3. What are some strategies your school has adopted in order to improve educational access?

#### **PART IV. EQUITY**

1. What does educational inequity look like in your country (e.g. Urban/rural, male/female, rich/poor, ethnic minorities, etc.)? What are some challenges your country face in increasing educational equity?
2. What measures have been taken by your country to increase educational equity? Were these efforts successful?
3. What are some strategies your school has adopted in order to improve educational equity?

#### **PART V. QUALITY**

1. How would you describe the quality of education in your country? What are some challenges your country face in increasing educational quality?
2. What measures have been taken by your country to increase educational quality? Were these efforts successful?
3. How would you rate the educational quality in your school? Do students at your school graduate with adequate skills, knowledge, and preparation for the workforce or for higher education? What are some strategies your school has adopted in order to improve educational quality?

#### **PART VI. CONCLUDING QUESTIONS**

1. Out of the three components of educational development, which one do you think presents the greatest challenge? Why?
2. Which component do you think is being prioritized by your government? To what extent do you agree or disagree?

3. In your opinion, what could serve as potential solutions to problems of access, equity, and/or quality in your country?
4. Would you be willing to be contacted should further clarifications be needed? Please provide email or phone number: