

## Valuing teacher voices

### Towards a new social contract for education

#### World Teachers' Day 2024

The appeal of the teaching profession seems to be in decline globally as factors, including inadequate pay, poor working conditions and a lack of recognition, have made the career unattractive to potential recruits and current teachers alike. This background paper discusses the importance of teacher voices in raising the esteem of the profession by soliciting their contributions to decision- and policy-making at all levels of education systems. By actively participating in social dialogue and collective bargaining, a new social contract for education that values teacher voices can be leveraged to promote collaborative decision-making, innovation and improved working conditions, raising the attractiveness of a teaching career. Even so, barriers to free and open negotiations between governments, employers and teacher unions, can put the impacts of teacher voices at risk. To rectify this, systems need to better institutionalise teacher voices through social dialogue mechanisms while also fostering new means for all teachers to express their needs.

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## Introduction

Over the course of an average day, teachers make a countless number of decisions to improve their students' learning and well-being. Judgements may range from selecting relevant pedagogical approaches and resources when adapting content to implementing appropriate classroom management strategies. These decisions are not trivial; research has shown time and again that teachers are the most important school-level factor impacting student learning outcomes (Rivkin et al., 2005; Chetty et al., 2014). The COVID-19 crisis and subsequent global school closures serve as a stellar example of the capacity of teachers to create, innovate and make pedagogical decisions (OECD, 2020a; TTF, 2020a).

Considering their wealth of decision-making experience and deep understanding of their students' needs, how then are systems incorporating teacher voices into policy-making, planning and management? The surprising answer is that often, while most teachers are constantly asked to make decisions at the classroom level, their inputs are not solicited at the school, district or national levels. Broadly, not incorporating teacher voices into decision-making and planning processes hinders the democratization of education as promoted for decades in international instruments, ranging from the ILO/UNESCO 1966 Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers (ILO and UNESCO, 2019) to the recently published recommendations of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession in 2024 (ILO,

UNESCO and United Nations, 2024). Failing to consider teachers' perspectives in education policy decisions not only reveals a lack of trust in their capacity and professionalism, it may also result in little buy-in and ownership by teaching staff and, ultimately, in the failure or irrelevance of new policies or reforms affecting them, their students and societies at large.

Celebrating the 2024 edition of World Teachers' Day, this paper seeks to unpack the value of teacher voices at all levels of the education system. Specifically, it emphasizes that the participation of teachers in decision- and policy-making can improve how education systems function and raise the attractiveness of a profession that evidence shows is losing its appeal globally. Beyond examining the impacts of teacher voices on policies related to professional development or creating insights around curricula, pedagogy and assessment, this paper will also explore the traditional role that trade unions and collective bargaining can have on improving terms of employment, including pay and working conditions. By professionalizing this career, teacher voices can also play a major role in aligning systems with the new social contract for education that envisions teaching as a more collaborative and innovative profession (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). This is also critical as a way forward as called for in the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2016).

## Teacher shortages – A profession in decline?

Teachers occupy a central role in the provision of a quality education for students, and yet the perceived value of the teaching profession paradoxically seems to be in decline globally. While there are many reasons for this, they broadly stem from the profession losing its appeal to both prospective teaching candidates and those already in the workforce (UNESCO and TTF, 2024). At the most basic level, poor remuneration – especially compared to careers requiring similar levels of qualifications – and unsatisfactory working conditions, such as long working hours, large class sizes or a lack of infrastructure and resources, may make the profession unappealing (UNESCO and TTF, 2024; Podolsky et al., 2016). Additional issues that may cause teachers to seek other careers include a lack of opportunities for professional growth, few chances for collaboration,

low professional status, inadequate management practices, weak employment protection, the recruitment of unqualified teachers, low trust in teachers and, importantly, feeling like they do not have a seat at the table in policy- and decision-making processes (Arnold & Rahimi, forthcoming; UNESCO & TTF, 2024).

Recent projections from the Global Report on Teachers estimate that the world will need an additional 44 million teachers to reach universal primary and secondary education by 2030 (UNESCO and TTF, 2024). The teacher attrition rate, which contributes to and exacerbates ongoing teacher shortages, can be considered a strong proxy indicator of the attractiveness of the profession. While more data collection, research and analysis are needed to fully determine current

patterns, teacher attrition is on the rise globally. Between 2015 and 2023, the teacher attrition rate increased from 4.6 per cent to 6.0 per cent in primary education; it doubled from 4.1 per cent to 8.4 per cent in lower secondary education; and it increased from 4.1 to 6.5 per cent in upper secondary education. This has serious implications for teacher shortages as approximately 58 per cent – nearly 6 in 10 – of the additional teachers needed by 2030 are due to attrition (UNESCO and TTF, 2024).

Decreasing interest in studying education provides further evidence of a profession in decline. In the United States, longitudinal data among pre-university students show they ranked education 8<sup>th</sup> for their intended area of study in 2017 compared to 4<sup>th</sup> in 2007 (Croft et al., 2018). In Egypt, Greece and Türkiye, public perceptions of the teaching profession decreased substantially between 2013 and 2018 (Varkey Foundation, 2018). Reasons for this vary. For example, in Egypt, educational authorities' lack of capacity to fund education and increase teacher salaries resulted in increased private tutoring and the recruitment of assistant teachers in lieu of qualified teachers (Hamouda, 2024; Yee, 2023).



**Systems will continue to struggle with teacher shortages if they fail to tap into the expertise of teachers to collaborate in decision-making that raises the esteem of the profession.**

Raising the attractiveness of the teaching profession is a multidimensional process requiring a comprehensive multi-level strategy to dignify and valorize the career by providing adequate pay and decent working conditions as well as raising the professionalism of teaching through lifelong professional development, collaborative opportunities or enhanced career pathways (UNESCO and TTF, 2024). Education systems will continue to struggle with teacher shortages if they fail to tap into the expertise of teachers to collaborate in decision-making that raises the esteem of the profession.

## Importance and impacts of teacher voices

The concept of 'teacher voices' takes many forms across all levels of educational decision-making. It can range from union representatives negotiating fair salaries and working conditions to teachers having more say in their own professional learning journey. Teacher voices can then be defined as the active participation of teachers and the influence they exert in shaping educational policies, practices and decisions that affect their work and students' learning experiences. It includes teachers' ability to express their professional opinions, insights and expertise in various areas, including curriculum design, pedagogy, classroom management, assessment, school policies and broader educational reforms. Therefore, recognizing and empowering teacher voices is seen as crucial to the creation of effective, responsive and equitable educational systems.

Enhancing teacher voices may raise the overall attractiveness of the profession over time. For example, teachers' perceptions of collaborative decision-making,

school climate and teacher-student relationship were strong predictors of teacher job satisfaction (OECD, 2020c ; Sarafidou and Chatziioannidis, 2013). Some research has even shown that incorporating teacher voices into decision-making correlates to higher student learning outcomes. Analysis from a five-year study in the United States examined surveys from nearly 900,000 teachers and showed that higher levels of teacher leadership and decision-making were positively related to high student achievement scores in math and language arts (Ingersoll et al., 2017). Drilling down further, a meta-analysis in the United States corroborated this finding showing that teacher voices, particularly in classroom decisions around improving curriculum, instruction and assessment were positively related to achievement (Shen et al., 2020). Evidence also emerges in developing countries to show that teacher voices through classroom decision-making is related to student achievement in Kenya (Makewa, L.N., 2011), in Nigeria and Eswatini (Lockheed and Komenan, 1989),

and in Ethiopia (Sanfo and Malgoubri, 2023). Likewise across countries participating in the PASEC Assessment study in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa, teachers' pedagogical skills and subject-matter knowledge amplified their voices, leading to higher achievement scores (Bietenbeck et al., 2023).



**In South Africa, teacher voices became a source for alternative discourses to the apartheid system of education.**

Taking a longer-term view, teacher voices can also have broader impacts that reach far beyond the well-being of teachers and students. Giving teachers a voice helps democratize education systems and may serve as a

model students can emulate, preparing them to take part in the public and political life of their communities and societies (Hammersley-Fletcher et al., 2017). For instance, in South Africa, teacher voices “became a source for alternative discourses to the apartheid system of education” through campaigns for social justice and systemic reform (Samuel, 2014, p. 612). Teachers enacted agendas for change in their classrooms before it eventually “spilled into broader social action” (Samuel, 2014, p. 612). In Latin America, teacher unions often tend to be involved with movements around democratization and human rights, especially for indigenous groups. Teacher unions in Bolivia, for instance, promoted bilingual and multicultural education for decades to ensure students become literate in both Spanish and their indigenous language, helping to ensure the right was enshrined into law for all students in the country by the early 2000s (Finger and Gindin, 2015).

## Traditional applications of teacher voices

This paper emphasizes the broader concept of ‘teacher voices’, due to its critical nature for empowering teachers. Defining and understanding the concept of social dialogue, however, is a useful starting point to understanding the role and impacts that teacher voices can play. Across all labour sectors, social dialogue refers to ‘all types of negotiation, consultation or simply exchange of information between or among representatives of governments, employers and workers on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy’<sup>1</sup>. It can be institutionalized or informal and occur at operational, national or regional levels, with the primary aim of promoting consensus building and democratic participation among key stakeholders. Effective social dialogue can contribute to resolving substantial economic and social issues, fostering good governance as well as enhancing social and industrial

stability (ILO, 2019). In the teaching profession, it is aimed at resolving labour related issues and promoting decent work for teachers.

In the context of education, social dialogue provides a platform for teachers, education authorities, policy-makers, communities and other stakeholders to exchange ideas and collaboratively address challenges and identify solutions. It cultivates a participatory approach to decision-making and ensures that the voices, experiences and perspectives of teachers are considered and included in the development and implementation of education policies. Historically, teacher unions have played a leading role in advocating for the rights, interests and well-being of educators through this process, shaping the direction and development of education systems globally (UNESCO and TTF, 2023).



**In the United States, 33.7 per cent of workers in education, training or library occupations were members of unions compared to 8.6 per cent in manufacturing and 10.0 per cent across all sectors.**

Teacher unions seek to ensure that their members enjoy job security, earn appropriate pay and retirement compensation as well as experience adequate working conditions (Wiborg, forthcoming). Unions can influence government policies through social dialogue (ILO, 2015, p. 2) as well as by consulting with government agencies while policies concerning teachers are being developed (Wiborg, forthcoming). While there are no standardized global measurements that indicate the extent of teacher

<sup>1</sup> Social dialogue can exist as a tripartite process, with the government as an official party to the dialogue or it may consist of bipartite relations between only labour and management (or trade unions and employers' organizations) (ILO, 2019).



union involvement, country and regional data show that participation in education unions outpaces other sectors. For example, in 2023 in the United States, 33.7 per cent of those working in education, training and library occupations were members of unions compared

to 8.6 per cent of those working in manufacturing and 10.0 per cent overall (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Based on available data, teacher union density<sup>2</sup> is also relatively high compared to other sectors in many Asian countries (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1: Teacher and trade union density percentages for selected Asian countries**

	Fiji	India	Indonesia	Malaysia	Nepal	Philippines
Teacher trade union density	81	33	53	80	43	26
Trade union density	13.2	19.8	13	8.7	30.2	8.5

*Note:* Teacher union density was calculated using data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) on the estimated number of teachers in each country and union estimates of member numbers in 2020 (Ford and Ward, 2021). Trade union density numbers use the latest data available for each country – Fiji (2016), India (2017), Nepal (2018), Indonesia (2019), Malaysia (2018) and the Philippines (2020) – and convey the number of employees who are union members as a percentage of the total number of employees. These percentages exclude those who are not in paid employment and come from a compilation of ILO data (ILO Department of Statistics, 2024).

*Source:* ILO Department of Statistics, 2024; Ford and Ward, 2021, p. 19.

## The labour dimension of teacher voices

While not unique to teaching, concerns around wages and working conditions are some key factors that can lower the attractiveness of a teaching career (UNESCO and TTF, 2024; Mulkeen et al., 2017). Teacher voices in the form of social dialogue, however, can prove vital to raising the prestige of the profession. Research has shown that when public authorities engage in ongoing social dialogue, the trust engendered can translate into positive outcomes for students and communities since it creates an environment where the focus shifts away from teachers to supporting students and their learning and well-being (OECD, 2020b). Evidence also suggests that the quality of social dialogue plays a key role given the relationship identified between the perception of a “collaborative and supportive relationship” by unions and changes in pay and working conditions over a three-year period (Thompson, 2021). The process of social dialogue can progress through different levels and intensities of dialogue as new policies are developed, ranging from information exchange to consultation and negotiation.



**Ministry and teacher union officials in Chile were consulted throughout the development process of a new national teacher policy, jointly signing a finalized version.**

Ministries of education and teacher unions can then engage in an ongoing exchange of information, consultation and negotiations to better reach a compromise when developing new policies involving working conditions and teacher remuneration. For example, Chile created a new national teacher policy in 2016 that aimed to raise the quality and appeal of the profession by revamping the career structure and pay scales tied to a reform of initial and continuous training and induction standards (Mizala and Schneider, 2019). Ministry officials and union representatives were consulted throughout the teacher policy development process and negotiated the final contents of the reform, with the union emphasizing more preparation/non-teaching time for teachers, union inputs on the design of teacher evaluations and higher salaries and retirement bonuses. Ministry and union officials jointly signed off on a finalized version before sending it to the legislature for approval (Mizala and Schneider, 2019).

In contrast, social dialogue can also include significant pressure by teachers and their representatives in the negotiation process. In Morocco, where social dialogue frequently relates to wages, working conditions and education reforms, protests in 2019 preceded negotiations and collective bargaining. While sometimes fractious, the social dialogue process however prevailed

<sup>2</sup> The number of employees that are union members as a percentage of the total number of employees (ILO Department of Statistics, 2024).

and resulted in a collective decision to better integrate contract teachers into the civil service, reducing tensions and the risk of strikes. More recently, in early 2024, a new set of negotiations in Morocco resulted in reforms around common agreement and inputs from both union and government officials on a unified status for all teachers despite contract type (Education International,

2024a). Meanwhile in Mongolia, a series of campaigns and public demonstrations in 2023 led by the Federation of Mongolian Education and Science Unions (FMESU) resulted in significant reforms across multiple education sectors with salary increases of about 50 per cent for teachers by 2026 (Education International, 2024b).

## The professional dimension of teacher voices

Whereas labour issues may apply to any sector, teacher voices also play a crucial role in ‘professional issues’ unique to the teaching profession, spanning across pedagogy, curricula, assessment of professional development and research opportunities (Stevenson et al., 2018). Including teachers in decision-making helps increase their professional esteem while allowing them to develop a greater sense of ownership, pride

and motivation in their role in shaping the systems in which they work (UNESCO and TTF, 2024). Moreover, when teachers are given a seat at the table as decisions and policies are developed, it can promote consensus building and democratic involvement – values that can thereafter be fostered in classrooms and throughout wider society (UNESCO, 2004).



**Teacher unions in Scotland actively engage with planners on developing curricula and designing policies around teacher education in a process of ‘co-construction’.**

Some systems do leverage the vast knowledge and experience of teachers on student learning outcomes and classroom realities by incorporating their voices into pedagogical and curricula decision-making. In the state of Tamil Nadu in India, teachers participated in both the design and implementation phases of a new reform that shifted pedagogical techniques (see **Box 1**). Similarly, in Scotland, teacher unions actively engage with planners on developing curricula and designing policies around teacher education in a process of ‘co-construction.’ Based on interviews with union leaders and union-active teachers, this integrated process has helped to validate the autonomy and professional judgement of teachers (Bascia and Stevenson, 2017).

### Box 1: Eliciting teacher voices in pedagogical reforms in Tamil Nadu, India

Beginning in 2003, the state of Tamil Nadu in India developed the Activity Based Learning (ABL) reform that aimed to reorganise classroom structures and shift teachers’ pedagogical techniques to enable students to take more control of their own learning. This marked an important shift in practice and could have led to heavy pushback from teachers if the new techniques were imposed upon them. However, the programme engaged teachers throughout the design and pilot phases, allowing them to fully understand the value of the new approach and develop a sense of ownership. Teacher buy-in combined with updated teacher training methods and new curricula proved vital as the approach was rolled out through schools across the state. As an unequivocal sign of success, teachers have provided sustained support to the reforms, allowing the ABL programme to remain in place in spite of several changes in state government. The success of the initiative has resulted in spread to other states in India and even to other countries, including Bangladesh, Ghana and Ethiopia (Aslam et al., 2021).

Systems may also amplify teacher voices by promoting them as agents of change and community leaders, thereby adding to the dignity of the profession. For example, government initiatives in Ecuador have established large-scale social dialogue efforts that involve a wide range of educational actors, including teachers, in the development and implementation of a new national education plan for 2025-2040 (Ecuador MINEDUC, 2024). Initially, learning groups were formed to provide teachers with a platform to express their concerns and the challenges they face every day while providing potential ideas on how to correct them. To further valorize the teaching career, the government then appointed teachers as community leaders to promote the new policy (TTF, forthcoming).

An important impact of incorporating teacher voices into the policy-making process is the increased buy-in of teachers. In Ghana, the Ministry of Education strived to involve teacher unions in the policy development process. While representatives were reluctant at first due to past perceptions of policies that had simply been imposed on them, a conducive environment emerged as unions were asked to note their 'input and grievances' (UNESCO and TTF, 2023, p. 27). Ghana also consulted nearly 250 teachers directly to compile a report that reflected their voices and feedback, which also contributed to the development of a new policy framework (UNESCO and TTF, 2023). This process of participation and consensus building proved to teachers that new initiatives marked a departure from the

decisions that were forced on them in the past, which allowed for a smoother implementation than previous reforms (UNESCO and TTF, 2023).



**Ghana consulted nearly 250 teachers directly to compile a report that reflected their voices and feedback, contributing to the development of a new policy framework.**

Education systems that amplify teacher voices over sustained periods can raise the overall esteem of the profession. Finland has a long history of cultivating the autonomy and professionalism of their teachers by providing them with high levels of agency in decision-making about their classrooms, schools and professional learning (Chung, 2023). Initial teacher training in Finland also incorporates and promotes the use of research and critical thinking to encourage the use of data and insights when making pedagogical decisions (Cao et al., 2023). This has helped shape the perception of teaching as a desirable profession, with the University of Helsinki having more rigorous standards and consequently a lower acceptance rate to its teacher education programme (6.8 per cent) than to the law (8.3 per cent) or medical (7.3 per cent) programmes in 2016 (Muhonen, 2017).

## Other means of expressing and leveraging teacher voices

Teacher voices can also be amplified through non-traditional means, including internet platforms, social media campaigns or by engaging outside entities and local community members. With the rapid spread of internet accessibility, digital technology, voicing and disseminating ideas has become easier than ever for individuals and groups alike. Social media campaigns have also provided teachers with new avenues to raise their voices and impact their systems and communities, such as Les Stylos Rouges in France (see **Box 2**). Meanwhile in Portugal, due to the perceived lack of social dialogue during the COVID-19 pandemic, the teacher union planned online meetings with teachers to collect their opinions to convey them to the Ministry of Education (Education International, 2020).

Due to the importance of education to so many different stakeholders, actors beyond traditional teacher unions – such as those from civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector – can sometimes play a role in combination with social dialogue to amplify teacher voices. In Malawi, a steering committee for developing policies on teachers received inputs from a variety of sources, including multiple government agencies (Education, Gender and Labour); development partners, including UNESCO, UNICEF and the Norwegian Teacher Initiative (NTI); and local education groups that included teacher unions, CSOs and representatives from teacher education institutions (UNESCO and TTF, 2023).



### Box 2: Les Stylos Rouges teacher movement in France

A prominent example of teachers raising their voices outside traditional channels is Les Stylos Rouges (the red pens) movement in France. The group, which does not link itself to a specific union or political party, emerged in late 2018 as a means for teachers to publicly proclaim the struggles of French teachers (Damgé, 2019). In a shift from more established methods, Les Stylos Rouges has established a heavy online presence, gaining more than 40,000 members on its [Facebook group](#) within weeks of establishment and maintaining more than 75,000 members in 2024 (France24, 2019). They have established a list of demands, ranging from ensuring that teachers' pay increases to maintain purchasing power to creating a dedicated occupational health service to halting job cuts (Damgé, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the group went so far as to file a complaint in the Court of Justice of the Republic against the Minister of Education "for deliberately endangering the lives of others" by not closing schools more quickly (Béliet, 2021).

Teacher unions may also reach out directly to their communities and local organisations to further amplify their voices. A union in Poland launched a website which published expert opinions on how government policies could potentially undermine the education system. The movement culminated in the mobilization of some 50,000 people – including parents, students, teachers and CSOs – to question government reforms (Bascia and Stevenson, 2017). In Minnesota in the United States, local teacher unions developed an online survey and held public meetings to determine what community members thought should be included in teacher contracts. Union representatives then entered into contract negotiations with a list of requests as outlined by their community to include smaller class sizes, culturally relevant pedagogy and high-quality professional development for teachers (Bascia and Stevenson, 2017).

In addition to labour issues, internet-based platforms were also an important means for exercising teacher voices to help with the challenges faced in online

teaching. For example, during COVID-19-related school closures in the Republic of Korea, the 'Community of 10,000 Representative Teachers' connected teachers interactively to share their ideas, information and good practice about online education and offer each other advice for difficulties encountered in real-time (Republic of Korea, Ministry of Education, 2020). Across 36 countries in Europe, teachers are extending their voices through the eTwining and Scientix teacher communities to collaborate and work together to co-develop projects and learn from one another through online training and communities of practice. Due to its success, the multilingual portal, available in 31 languages, has amassed involvement of over 800,000 teachers, 200,000 schools and 100,000 project (European Schoolnet, 2024). Meanwhile in Rwanda, the use of mobile phones and WhatsApp groups was critical to give teachers a voice in the learning and application of new ICT in education skills. Teachers could voice their needs, challenges and exchange good practice via channels with facilitators and with each other to promote dialogue (Rwanda, 2017).

## Teacher voices within the international education community

Public sector teachers have a general legal status as public sector employees (or civil servants in some countries) and a special legal status derived from their leading role in the realization of the fundamental right to education, as defined in the ILO-UNESCO Recommendation, which is also applicable to private contexts and based on international legal instruments recognizing the right to education (United Nations, 2023).

Further, there are international mechanisms in place to amplify teacher voices and concerns. One example is

through submitting allegations of non-compliance of the 1966 ILO/UNESCO Recommendation to the Joint ILO/UNESCO Committee of Experts on the Application of the Recommendations concerning Teaching Personnel (CEART) (ILO, 2024). While the Recommendations are not legally binding and the role of the CEART is not judicial, one of its key roles is to review issues associated with the application of the Recommendations and the encouragement of governments, employers and teacher organisations to adopt measures to enhance the status of the teaching profession.

The International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 also aims to give teachers a voice in advocating for their critical role in quality education. Acting as an independent alliance it is dedicated to raising awareness, expanding knowledge, and supporting countries towards achieving Target 4.c of SDG4 and the broader Education 2030 Goals. More than 110 UNESCO Member States and 60 institutional members from international organizations, civil society, bilateral

organizations and private foundations synergize to promote and support teachers.

Moreover, the SDG 4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee, which aims to speed country-level progress towards SDG 4, tracks global progress on teachers stemming from the Transforming Education Summit, which included an Action Track on Teachers.

## Challenges that undermine teacher voices

Even though integrating teachers' inputs into normal communication and feedback structures can help improve decision-making and raise the esteem of the teaching profession, numerous challenges can undermine teacher voices. These may range from systemic structural issues to teachers simply losing

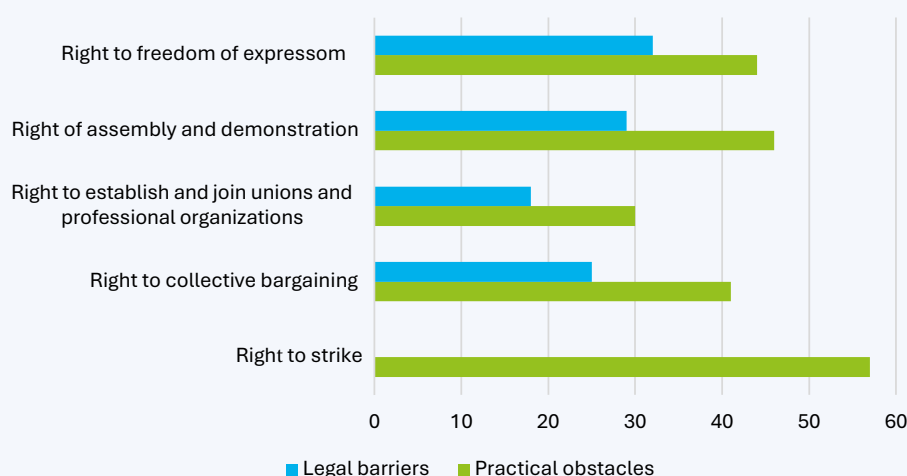
confidence that their voices are being heard. To fully realize the positive impact of teacher voices and improve the appeal of the profession, it is important that systems first understand the challenges that prevent teacher inputs from having their intended effect.

### Breakdowns, disagreements or a lack of negotiations and dialogue

In some countries, a core challenge to incorporating teacher voices into labour issues may stem from a general lack of labour rights. A 2024 global survey of national unions in 150 countries found that, based on indicators from International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, 74 per cent of countries were thought to have impeded the registration of trade unions, 79 per cent violated the right to collective bargaining and 43 per cent restricted the right of free speech and assembly for workers (ITUC, 2024). In other cases, countries may recognize the freedom of association in the private sector but regulate union rights in public service positions. Such examples include Indonesia, which does not allow public servants to unionize, and Thailand, where the government has refused to recognize the National Thai Teachers Union as public servants do not have the right to organize and bargain (Bitonio, 2022; Ford and Ward, 2021).

Meanwhile, teacher union leaders report significant restrictions within the legal frameworks of many

countries that prevent teachers from fully enjoying their rights. In fact, out of 204 teacher union representatives from 121 countries, 32 per cent indicated legal barriers to the right to freedom of expression, 29 per cent identified legal obstacles to the right of assembly and demonstration, 18 per cent reported impediments to the right to establish and join unions and professional organizations, and 25 per cent noted legal challenges to the right to collective bargaining (Arnold & Rahimi, forthcoming). Beyond legal barriers, findings also showed that almost half of teacher union representatives encountered practical obstacles that impeded their access to these same rights, and 57 per cent indicated practical obstacles that hindered the right to strike. It is noteworthy that union representatives from Africa, Asia and the Pacific and Latin America reported significantly more barriers and obstacles than those from the Caribbean, Europe and North America (Arnold & Rahimi, forthcoming).

**Figure 1: Percentage of unions reporting challenges to rights underlying teacher voices, 2023**

Source: Arnold & Rahimi, forthcoming.



**Among 204 teacher union representatives from 121 countries, 32 per cent indicated legal barriers to the right to freedom of expression while 18 per cent reported impediments to the right to establish and join unions and professional organizations.**

Apart from the enabling conditions needed to support social dialogue, formal mechanisms, including agreements consultations, must be in place to ensure teacher voices are heard. However, according to union representatives, formal mechanisms vary in strength depending on the policy issues. They are reported to be relatively robust on issues of teacher remuneration, employment protection and working time. Still, 15, 21 and 26 per cent of union representatives respectively reported no mechanisms for social dialogue were in place for these issues. In relation to issues surrounding professional learning, teachers' health and well-being, management and equity, roughly one third of participants reported the existence of formal consultations while another third reported that no such mechanisms were in place (Arnold & Rahimi, forthcoming).

Unions can also sometimes act to prevent policy reforms from taking effect if there are disagreements on whether these reforms will benefit education or undermine protecting the teaching profession (Wiborg, forthcoming). For example, due to substantial levels of teacher shortages in Austria, the government sought to implement a programme that allowed anyone with a tertiary level degree and three years of working experience to become a teacher if they passed an

assessment. The Austrian teacher union opposed this measure, worrying that it would deprofessionalize teaching and lead to unqualified candidates in the classroom. While hiring more teachers would help ease teachers' concerns of heavy workloads, the union countered with a strategy to hire more support staff and raise teacher salaries to make the profession more attractive to qualified candidates. Nonetheless, about 1,000 new recruits were hired through the programme for the 2023/2024 school year to increase overall numbers (Wiborg, forthcoming).

When negotiations and collective bargaining break down completely, this can lead to the most extreme form of expressing teacher voices through union-led strikes. In Jordan, for example, teachers held large-scale protests and a nationwide strike to demand pay raises in 2019. Fortunately, these actions eventually led to negotiations that increased teacher salaries (Al Jazeera, 2019). In Quebec (Canada), meanwhile, different teacher unions went on strike for about 2 weeks or more, resulting in further negotiations which garnered salary increases ranging from 20 to 24 per cent over five years (Lofaro, 2024). Finally, strikes in the United Kingdom, where it is reported teachers' average real incomes have decreased by 6 per cent compared to 14 years ago led to renewed negotiations, including an offer of a 5.5 per

cent pay rise (Jeffreys & Standley, 2024). While each of these strikes contributed towards greater teacher pay, they also raised tensions between government and teacher representatives, reduced trust and potentially

made future negotiations more difficult. Importantly, teacher strikes also lead to fewer classroom hours for students and have negative consequences for learning (Conover and Wallet, 2022).

## Poor communication, messaging or lack of confidence

Other challenges to fully incorporating teacher voices can stem from a lack of clear messaging or not establishing effective platforms for communication between teachers and decision-makers (Stevenson et al., 2018). Teachers working in areas that lack internet connectivity may especially face difficulties in making their voices heard. In India, teachers and their representatives in rural provinces that lack connectivity have struggled to communicate with national leadership and access pertinent information (Ford and Ward, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, survey findings by the TTF in Afghanistan, Algeria, Brazil, France, Guinea and Sierra Leone show that a lack of clear messaging around the roles and importance of teacher unions can also contribute to teachers perceiving that they have little input or influence on decision-making processes. Even when teachers are members of unions, they may have little awareness of the influence unions have on working conditions (Reddy, forthcoming). In Fiji, many teachers join unions to access insurance and loans or participate in social activities while only a small percentage of members understood that the unions' main function was to advocate for their rights (Ford and Ward, 2021, p. 31). In Sierra Leone, some teachers did not even know a union existed even though they automatically became members upon hiring (Reddy, forthcoming).



**In France, a survey of teachers found that 98 per cent of respondents felt they could freely join a union, but only 14 per cent felt they had the ability to influence decisions affecting the quality of student learning.**

In some circumstances, union leaders may simply not be perceived as effective by the teachers they represent. In France, a survey of teachers by the TTF during the COVID-19 pandemic found that while 98 per cent of respondents said they could freely join a union, only 8 per cent felt they had the ability to influence decisions that affected their own safety and only 14 per cent felt they had the ability to influence decisions affecting the quality of student learning (Reddy, forthcoming). Likewise, the same survey of teachers in Brazil found that only 27 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that their union was strong or influential while only 25 per cent felt that their union had successfully negotiated for teachers in their community (Reddy, forthcoming). Other countries have teacher unions that become politicized or overly aligned with government interests, reducing the trust teachers place in them (Reddy, forthcoming).

## Failure to properly represent specific groups of teachers

While all teachers may struggle with the challenges mentioned above when trying to make their voices heard, some specific groups have especially lacked representation and inputs into decision-making processes historically. In various contexts, women, teachers with disabilities, those working in crisis or refugee settings, or teachers working with minority groups or in rural areas may struggle to effectively voice concerns or challenges they face. Other groups may also lack a voice, especially teachers working in the private sector and contract teachers working outside of the civil service collective agreement.

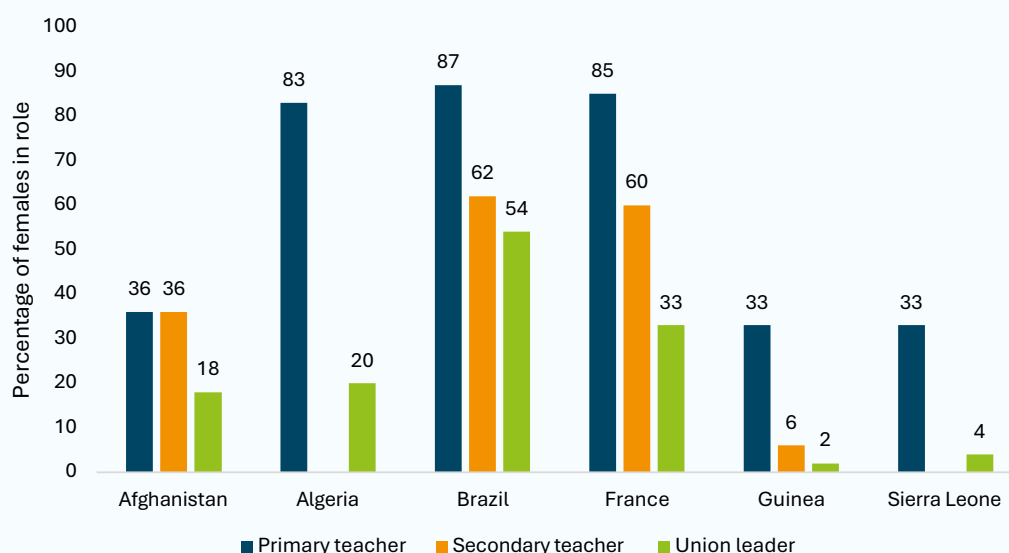


**Female leadership in teacher unions can be rare and not proportionally representative of the share of women in the teacher workforce.**

Globally, teaching is a largely feminine profession, with women making up 68 per cent of teachers at the primary level and 56 per cent at the secondary level in 2023 (UIS, 2024). Even so, female representation in teacher unions – especially in leadership positions – can be rare or, at the very least, not proportionally representative of the share of women in the teacher

workforce (see **Figure 2**). This lack of representation in senior union positions may make it more difficult for female teachers to voice concerns that can cause them to leave the profession, such as unsafe or unsanitary working conditions, unsuitable housing options or gender-based violence (UNESCO and TTF, 2024; Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2022).

**Figure 2: Percentage of females among teachers and union leadership, 2023 or latest data available**



*Note:* Union leader data came from surveys sent to teachers in each of the countries. Primary and secondary teacher data come from the UIS database representing the most recent year available: Afghanistan (2019 for primary and 2018 for secondary), Algeria (2023), Brazil (2022), France (2019; primary data come from the [European Commission](#)), Guinea (2021) and Sierra Leone (2023). No secondary data were available for Algeria or Sierra Leone.

*Source:* Reddy, forthcoming, pp. 28-29; UIS, 2024.

Although teacher voices can serve as a major factor to help systems address issues around inequality or discrimination (Stevenson and Milner, 2023), before these can be addressed, systems must fully realize the challenges faced by underrepresented teachers. Some international organizations have developed tools that allow for the better understanding of teachers' needs – especially for those working in the most vulnerable situations. The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) developed a tool to assess teacher competencies in Afghanistan and sought to determine their needs and experiences (INEE, 2021). This enabled policy-makers to understand the challenges these teachers face based on contextual and personal factors, such as the region where they worked, their age, gender, teaching experience and education level (INEE, 2021). Based on the responses of nearly 300 teachers, specific recommendations then emerged for policy-makers and programme implementers. Save the Children developed a similar tool that is more

generalized to determine the factors affecting teacher well-being and motivation (Save the Children, 2018).

Challenges facing teachers working in crisis or emergency situations can include not having regular and established lines of communication with union representatives or policy-makers. Refugee teachers may face restrictions on their right to work or not have their qualifications recognized in a new location – as seen during the Syrian refugee crisis (UNESCO and TTF, 2024). Teachers with minority and migrant backgrounds or teachers with disabilities can experience direct or indirect discrimination and feel isolation at work (UNESCO and TTF, 2024; Ware et al., 2022; Ingersoll et al., 2019). These various factors can increase teachers' feelings of exclusion, underrepresentation and stress, which can potentially lead to increased attrition (OECD, 2020c).



## Enabling factors and good practices to encourage the inclusion of teacher voices

To overcome the challenges highlighted, there are many enabling factors and good practices that can help systems better incorporate teacher voices into their decision- and policy-making procedures. This includes the ratification and implementation of relevant

international conventions followed by the establishment of coordination mechanisms and enhanced means of communication to ensure that teacher voices find their proper place within formal processes and receive recognition across all systems.

### Enabling factors to establish teacher voices

Respect of freedom of association and the recognition of the right to collective bargaining are the foundation for teacher voices. These rights, were set out in the *ILO Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise* in 1948 (ILO, 1948) and in the *ILO Convention No. 98 on the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining* in 1949 (ILO, 1949). The principles and rights enumerated in these instruments are considered fundamental. For countries that are members of the ILO (187 Member States), adopting and adhering to these international conventions is critical to amplify teacher voices and protect their rights.

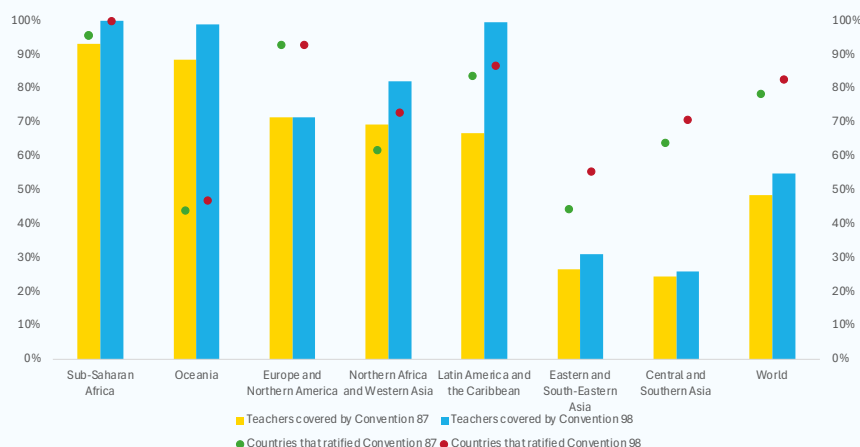
The ILO Conventions are also widely ratified by countries. For instance, a total of 158 and 168 countries or about seven and eight out of ten UNESCO Member States have ratified ILO conventions No. 87 and No. 98, respectively. Yet, in relation to the population size of individual countries, these conventions cover only 48 per cent and 55 per cent of all primary and secondary teachers, globally. This suggests that about just one in two primary and secondary teachers, globally, 'have a voice' within their profession based on the internationally-



**Globally, just 1 in 2 teachers are covered by international ILO labour conventions that provide for respect of freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining.**

recognized ILO conventions on the rights of freedom of association, organizing and collective bargaining. Regionally, this varies with the lowest proportion of teachers (fewer than one in three) being covered in both Eastern and South-eastern Asia and in Central and Southern Asia since several countries, including those with a high-population, have not ratified either ILO convention (ILO, 2024). Only the region of Oceania has a lower percentage of countries ratifying the conventions at 44 per cent and 47 per cent for ILO conventions 87 and 98, respectively (see **Figure 3**).

**Figure 3: Percentage of countries that have ratified ILO conventions that support teacher voices and the percentage of primary and secondary teachers working in those countries by region, 2024**



Note: Percentages of teachers are based on total primary and secondary teachers in those countries which ratified Conventions 87 and 98: (ILO, 2024) in all UNESCO Member States: <https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/?p=1000:12000>. Percentages of countries are based on total UNESCO Member States.

Source: Teacher data represent most recent figures from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics database, 2024.

In contrast with Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest proportion of countries having ratified both conventions, yet teacher voices through social dialogue remain less than optimal due to several factors, including legal and practical barriers (Arnold & Rahimi, forthcoming), a lack of union awareness, union fragmentation, low participation rates and a lack of capacity of unions, their representatives and leadership (Reddy, forthcoming). Europe and Northern America has the second largest proportion of countries ratifying the conventions (9 in 10). While teacher shortages in Europe have increased in recent times (UNESCO and TTF, 2024), social dialogue to amplify teacher voices can be strengthened by the European Trade Union Committee for Education as it brings the largest public sector in Europe into the European Social Dialogue System, meaning that social partners are co-legislators for teachers at the European level (European Trade Union Committee for Education, 2024).

Countries also need to ratify other human rights conventions, including the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR). The ICCPR, including Article 22, commits nations to respecting teachers' right to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and join trade unions (United Nations and OHCHR, 1966a). Meanwhile, ICESCR goes further in recognizing the right of unions to establish national federations and function freely, and the right to strike (Article 8). It also details several labour rights, including the right of everyone to have favourable working conditions that include fair pay, safe and healthy work settings, equal opportunities for promotion and reasonable limits on working hours

(Article 7) (United Nations and OHCHR, 1966b). In total, 173 and 172 countries in the world have signed and ratified the ICCPR and the ICESCR, respectively. Yet, while the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has noted that a blanket ban on strikes for all public servants with civil servant status, including school teachers, goes beyond the restrictions allowed under article 8, of concern is that a number of countries have not implemented all relevant articles in support of social dialogue. Moreover, there is the concern of "a shrinking space globally for trade unions, such as the restrictions on the right to strike, limiting the scope of collective bargaining and resulting in insecure contracts and other precarious working conditions" (United Nations, 2023).

Beyond the legally binding conventions, there also needs to be enough political will lending support to education and teachers specifically for governments and ministries to listen and implement teacher voices in policy measures. In Chile, the reform efforts mentioned previously could only come about due to a major tax reform the government passed beforehand that increased revenues and allowed for the payment of increased teacher salaries (Mizala and Schneider, 2019). In Delhi, a newly elected state government made education reform a priority in 2015, doubling the education budget and seeking to improve school infrastructure, community involvement, teacher training and direct student interventions (Sisodia, 2019; Sahoo, 2020). As part of these reforms, the newly established role of Mentor Teacher helped facilitate teacher voices while teacher inputs contributed to curricula and pedagogical reforms (EDT and IIEP-UNESCO, 2023; Sisodia, 2019).



**In Delhi, a newly elected state government in 2015 made education reform a priority, doubling the education budget, establishing the role of Mentor Teacher and seeking teacher inputs for curricula and pedagogical reforms.**

In contrast, Argentina – which has signed and ratified each of the conventions mentioned above – has seen teacher strikes ebb and flow based on the political cycle of the nation's presidency. Strikes increased from 2015-2019 as teacher organisations opposed regressive reforms that stopped wage negotiations, while the periods between 2011-2015 and 2019-2022 saw little conflict as negotiations between the government and unions remained open (Gindin et al., 2024, p. 10).

## Promising practices to further develop and enhance teacher voices

Encouragingly, a number of promising practices have emerged in varying contexts globally to promote and enhance the incorporation of teacher voices into everyday practice. If established channels of communication and negotiation are not already in place, countries can develop guidance and frameworks for including teacher voices in policy development. Working towards this goal, the Norwegian Teacher Initiative (NTI) was launched in 2017 in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Malawi and Uganda to strengthen national and international cooperation that promotes the development of improved policies for teachers (UNESCO, 2022).

This initiative brought together a host of international stakeholders<sup>3</sup> to work alongside local education groups (LEGs), teacher unions, CSOs and the private sector to develop frameworks and plans that emphasized social dialogue when designing teacher policies (UNESCO, 2022). An evaluation of the project found that it was well received among national stakeholders, with 100 per cent of those interviewed reporting that the activities to improve the capacity of teacher organisations were “highly relevant” to the needs of their country while approximately 95 per cent similarly deemed that the collaborative design of national teacher policies was also highly relevant (PPMI, 2021).

[Uganda](#) and [Zambia](#) have gone so far as to codify procedures to establish and manage exchanges by publishing social dialogue frameworks for teachers (Uganda MoES, 2018; Zambia, Ministry of General Education and Teacher Education and Specialised Services, 2021). These frameworks provide comprehensive guides that both emphasize the importance of social dialogue and provide tangible strategies and activities to ensure its implementation. Importantly, both documents also develop costing plans and evaluation strategies to determine the effectiveness of the outcomes of these social dialogues.

In conjunction with these frameworks, training and supporting union leaders to develop their professional competencies is also important. This includes strengthening their knowledge and skills around labour laws, negotiation and collective bargaining skills, education and teacher policy-making processes, and how they can contribute to shaping them. Education International has designed tools to provide union leaders with general guidance when determining the strengths and weaknesses of their organizations so

that they can then develop an effective action strategy (Education International, 2023a). At the same time, these tools afford more technical guidance on how to formulate cases and submit complaints (Education International, 2023b). In Scotland, the teacher union provides professional development to members at local universities that corresponds to master’s level training. This prepares union leaders to disburse grants and support teacher research projects as well as train them to advocate for professional learning activities for teachers at school and local levels (Basica and Stevenson, 2017).



**A union in Indonesia has developed an app that provides teachers with a direct means to request support and access professional development materials.**

Other systems have developed online tools to better connect teachers to union leaders, enabling them to express concerns or report challenges. In Indonesia, a union has developed their own mobile application to give teachers a direct means to request support. The application also provides professional development materials, discounts on certain services and a means for the collection of dues – a persistent problem for teachers in some regions (Ford and Ward, 2021). In India, a union in the state of Haryana has developed a strong social media presence that they use to mobilize their members and quickly disseminate information (Ford and Ward, 2021).

Another promising practice to improve communication involves creating roles designed to bridge the gap between teaching staffs and school or local leadership. In New York City in the United States, a new teacher career model was initiated in 2013 that created new positions collectively known as Teacher Leaders. In addition to role modelling effective classroom strategies and fostering collaboration among their peers, Teacher Leaders increasingly contributed to school-based decisions about curricula and instructional goals (Crehan et al., 2019).

3 These included Education International (EI), UNESCO, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the International Institute for Education Planning (IIEP), UNESCO’s Institute for Capacity Building in Africa and the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (TTF).

## Raising the voices of underrepresented groups

Unions can play a vital role in ensuring that a wide diversity of teacher voices are heard and implemented into planning and policy-making. For example, less experienced teachers may especially lack consultation in decision-making processes. To combat this, union officials in New Zealand have used social media accounts to attract and retain new membership among younger teachers. A closed Facebook group allows new teachers to connect and debate issues within their peer group while also providing valuable inputs to unions about teachers' concerns (Bascia and Stevenson, 2017). Other unions have sought to address the unequal gender representations highlighted previously (see previous section). In India, one union has introduced quotas for women in leadership positions to help diversify their representation (Ford and Ward, 2021).



**A teacher union in India has introduced quotas for women in leadership positions to help diversify their representation.**

All teachers deserve representation and a voice to ensure a safe and professional work environment. This means that policy-makers need to develop specific plans to solicit the voices of all teachers working in all situations. For example, the NTI mentioned previously developed a guidance note specifically on developing crisis-sensitive teacher policies. These guidelines emphasize the importance of consulting teachers when developing response strategies as well as appropriate policies and procedures. The guidance also highlights the importance of including teacher voices in communication and social mobilization campaigns to reach the most vulnerable students at risk of dropping out of school to help encourage their enrolment or re-enrolment (UNESCO, 2020).

Private sector teachers can also establish unions to amplify their voices. For instance, due to non-payment of salaries to private sector teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Togo, a new private sector union was established to defend teachers' rights and socio-economic interests through better representation of its membership to public authorities and international organizations to facilitate collective bargaining (Varley, 2020).w

## Recommendations to establish a new social contract

This paper has underscored the importance of teacher voices in raising the attractiveness and esteem of the teaching profession by improving wages and working conditions as well as recognizing teachers as professionals with important contributions that can help ensure the provision of quality education. In turn, improving the appeal of teaching and strengthening its collaborative and innovative nature can help reduce global teacher shortages and move systems towards a new social contract for education.

So, where do systems go from here? Broadly, there needs to be a recognition of – or potentially a cultural shift that values – the importance of teacher voices. To address labour issues, such as the provision of adequate wages and decent working conditions, countries need to defer to normative instruments such as those established by the ICCPR ([United Nations and OHCHR, 1966a](#)), ICESCR ([United Nations and OHCHR, 1966b](#)), and ILO Conventions No. 87 ([ILO, 1948](#)) and No. 98 ([ILO, 1949](#))

that advocate for the rights of association and collective bargaining. For professional issues, such as teacher contributions to research, professional learning or inputs on curricula and pedagogical techniques, instruments, such as the 1966 ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers ([ILO and UNESCO, 2017](#)) or the recommendations of the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession ([ILO, UNESCO and United Nations, 2024](#)), can help guide systems on incorporating teacher voices into decision-making. No matter the steps taken, systems need to dedicate time and resources to include teacher voices and social dialogue to ensure that the teaching profession continues to grow in esteem and strength. Only then can it become the collaborative, innovative and attractive profession envisioned by the new social contract for education ([International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021](#)).

## Recommendations for governments, policy-makers and employers

- Establish a good working relationship with teacher unions and teacher representatives built around the mutual exchange of information and consultation.
- Seek inputs from teachers when making decisions around curricula, pedagogy, assessment methodologies or other decisions in which teachers could provide valuable insights.
- Create clear roles and positions that can serve as a conduit for communication between teachers and school and local officials.
- Pursue inputs on the needs and challenges of underrepresented teacher voices, to especially include those working in rural and remote places, and in emergency or crisis situations.
- Facilitate teachers' capacity to freely exercise their existing rights, including the right of assembly, right to organize, right to establish and join unions and right to engage in collective bargaining.
- Develop holistic and comprehensive teacher policies that foster teacher agency and autonomy based on knowledge, competence and responsibility within education goals, and that foster a climate of trust and respect between school authorities, communities, learners and teachers.
- Institutionalise social dialogue between governments, teachers' organizations and relevant employers' organizations for developing policies on education, teaching and the teaching profession in relation to employment and working conditions, professional practice, technology and the transformation of education through an open and transparent process of negotiation and collective bargaining.
- Develop standards and support to teachers in their learning needs, including equitable access to CPD that is designed and determined in dialogue with the teaching profession and teacher training institutions. Teacher education and professional development should also develop competencies to engage in dialogue and promote teacher participation.
- Include specific provisions, guidelines and budget allowances for social dialogue when creating new teacher policies.

## Recommendations for school leaders

- Engage teachers regularly and seek inputs when designing and implementing school improvement plans, or other decisions affecting teachers.
- Provide teachers with opportunities to develop their own professional learning journeys to include professional development, collaboration and research opportunities.
- Promote teacher agency to create and select teaching materials, textbooks or classroom resources and in the application of teaching methods.

## Recommendations for teacher unions

- Engage in research and dialogue with education systems and teacher training institutions to ensure teachers can play a leadership and innovation role in relation to their professional practice.
- Develop multiple platforms for communication, including social media and online options, to gather inputs from teachers as well as explain new policies, reforms and negotiation processes.
- Provide training to union leaders to properly prepare them to engage in quality dialogue, negotiation and collective bargaining.
- Establish representation for all teachers – no matter their gender, age, ethnic identity, etc. – and work to ensure that union leadership and representation reflects a diversity of teacher voices.



## Recommendations for civil society

- Organize partnerships with teachers and unions to better understand challenges and issues where they may need support or additional influence in amplifying teacher voices.
- Hold discussions with local education and government officials to amplify teacher voices and ongoing social dialogue efforts.

## Recommendations for academia and the research community

- Partner with teachers, as knowledge producers, for research and academic undertakings.
- Help advocate for the role of teachers as researchers and public intellectuals, and make room for their participation in the academic life of universities and research organizations.
- Conduct research on the impact of teacher voices on education, student learning outcomes, teacher motivation, attractiveness of the profession and other areas of policy and practice to inform evidence-based decision-making.
- Build capacity on the role and impact of teacher voices in workshops, courses and publications to ensure social partners, including teachers, union representatives and education providers have updated knowledge and skills on dialogue and participatory decision-making.

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## Valuing teacher voices

### Towards a new social contract for education

#### World Teachers' Day 2024

Published for World Teachers' Day 2024, themed "Valuing Teacher Voices: Towards a New Social Contract for Education," this paper highlights the importance of elevating the teaching profession by amplifying teacher voices in decision-making and policy development. By fostering social dialogue and collective bargaining, we can enhance the profession's appeal, promote innovation, and improve working conditions. Addressing barriers to teacher participation will further support these efforts and help attract and retain dedicated educators.

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