Contract teachers: effective policy solution or inadequate response to deeper problems?

Debate

Recruiting enough teachers to meet the demand of expanding education systems has been a challenge in many contexts. Some argue that long term job security makes teachers less motivated to do a good job. Both concerns have led some countries to hire large contingents of less qualified teachers under nonpermanent contracts. Is the use of these contract teachers an effective policy solution, or is it an inadequate response to deeper problems?

Excerpts of a debate with Amita Chudgar: Associate Professor of Education Policy at Michigan State University and Karthik Muralidharan: Associate Professor of Economics at the University of California San Diego and Global Co-chair of Education Research at the Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL).

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Following is an edited transcript of the discussion.

What is meant by the term contract teachers? Does it mean different things in different contexts?

AC: The short answer would be yes. There seems to be a fair bit of variation in what the term contract teacher implies. In 2015-16 the International Task Force on Teachers For Education For All commissioned a study across 24 sub-Saharan African countries to understand their current contract teacher situation. I'm fortunate to be participating in the study, synthesizing what these countries are reporting back on their contract teacher systems.

One thing that stood out to us was the range of different arrangements that were subsumed under this umbrella of contract teachers, including volunteers, parents, community members, student teachers, recent trainees fulfilling national services obligations, expatriate teachers, retired teachers. In some countries, contract teachers were paid precariously through the communities, through the parents, leading to uncertain salary conditions. In other countries, there were much more formally-instituted government approaches to contract teacher hiring and payment.

This (variation) has implications for generalizing the findings we have on contract teachers across different contexts and (for) the lack of availability of systematic data on contract teachers.

Why have some education system chosen to employ contract teachers?
AC: There are tens of millions of new children enrolling in the school system creating a tremendous demand for new teachers. Teacher training institutes in many countries are unable to produce teachers at the rates they are needed. The status of the teaching profession is declining, which has led to further disinterest in the young people who might otherwise be qualified to join the teaching profession. Finally, teacher salaries are incredibly expensive. If you put all of these things together (about teachers) where there is a high need, short supply, and an expensive resource, countries have needed to cut corners to hire teachers who are less trained, less qualified and certainly less paid, so they can staff these classrooms more quickly and more cheaply.

KM: The variation of contract teachers makes it difficult to both document and do research. There are contract teachers who are the result of community level initiatives—parents chipping in their own money and doing things at an informal level. I don't think that is really controversial. The controversy is when it is actually a government policy that the needs of filling teacher positions in thousands of schools are systematically done through contract teachers.

I also wanted to add a couple of nuances to something Amita said. The problem is not the lack of interest in joining the teaching workforce at the current level of wage and benefits. The problem is often in terms of location: the expansion of enrolment is typically in rural areas and most of the more highly educated candidates who get into civil service jobs typically don't want to be in the rural area. The other reason I think contract teachers have been attractive, is because they're hired from the same community and they're often just more connected—it's less likely that they will be absent.

The use of contract teachers has been highly controversial in some contexts. What are the key points of that debate?

KM: There are two contentious questions. The first is: are contract teachers effective in teaching? And the second is: how effective are they relative to regular civil service teachers? I think the reason that the critics worry about this, is that the contract teachers typically have much lower levels of training—often no formal training, they might get a few weeks of pre-service training if at all. They also almost always have much lower pay, and uncertainty of pay. So there's a concern that their motivation levels might be lower.

There are also concerns of fairness, and legal issues concerning equal pay for equal work. Here are the contract teachers side by side with regular teachers doing the same job, and often getting paid much lower salaries. So, the combination of poor training, (potentially) poor motivation, and poor status, leads sceptics to believe that the contract teachers are not going to be effective.

The people who are the proponents of contract teachers point to the fact that the right way to think about this is that because the costs are lower it's not really the comparison between one civil service teacher and one contract teacher. You should be comparing one civil service teacher versus four or five contract teachers because that's how many you can hire for the same cost. And then you need to think about whether you get better education outcomes with a higher number of those teachers.

Arguments in favour are usually based on accountability—that it's incredibly hard to hold civil-service teachers accountable. You have higher rates of absenteeism. There are issues of connection to the local community—that it might in fact be better when you're trying to teach millions of first-generation learners, to have a teacher from the same community as opposed to somebody from further away. Given the fiscal constraints of developing countries, cost effectiveness is an absolutely essential consideration.
Could you tell us, Karthik, a little bit about the evidence that may exist about benefits and disadvantages?

KM: It is difficult to pinpoint the effect of contract per se. Contract teachers vary from regular civil service teachers in multiple ways, but the key characteristics are no civil service protections and lower pay. There are three to four studies I can think of.

There's one very nice study in Kenya by Esther Duflo, Pascaline Dupas and Michael Kremer. They find that adding the contract teacher does improve learning outcomes. And they find that the contract teacher is certainly no worse than the regular teacher, and in some cases even more effective. My study in Andhra Pradesh in India has very similar results. We add an extra contract teacher to 100 randomly selected schools and you find a significant increase in test scores in those schools, suggesting that the overall value added of the contract teacher was positive.

For primary school, the evidence is unambiguously in favour of the fact that adding a contract teacher has a positive impact on student learning. And then in most cases, that they're at least as effective as the regular teacher, but often at one third (or lower) of the cost.

A lot of people in education believe that paying higher salaries will give you better outcomes. And the evidence on this is absolutely non-existent. What matters is not the level of pay but the structure of pay. Indonesia, in 2005, passed this ambitious law to double teacher salaries across the board. Now of course it's possible that over time this may get you higher quality people. The question is does the salary affect the motivation of the incumbent teachers and what you find is that the doubling of the pay had absolutely zero impact on learning outcomes.

If you're going to be spending all of this money on salaries and getting basically zero impact, then the question is how much better can you do with that money in terms of improving learning outcomes.

I don't think the claim here is at all that contract teachers are better. But I think I'm very comfortable with the broad assessment that the contract teachers are no worse. And cost-adjusted, they're obviously a much better buy because you want to be thinking about how many more teachers you can hire as a result of that.

What's your response, Amita? How do you see the evidence on the benefits and disadvantages? AC: I have analyzed the PASEC data from five different Francophone African countries and while I don't find consistent evidence for or against contract teachers, I find that the context within which you ask this question is very important. In many of these contexts where teachers are often dealing with especially huge class sizes, we would expect if the schools were provided the additional support that, if nothing else, reduces the class size, there would be some beneficial results for the school. Studies that show this are therefore not surprising. So on those counts it would be fair to say that the evidence, while it may not be pointing to contract teachers being superior to regular teachers, does not seem to argue otherwise.

I do want to again emphasize the importance of the context within which the studies are conducted and (that) our knowledge right now is not based on studies from a vast number of different contexts.

I think it is important to think about some of the long term implications of what it means potentially to have a teacher a labour force where as a default people are hired with less training, where as a default they have no (job) guarantee, and as a default are paid lower salaries. It is important to consider what it means for the attrition in teacher labour force, or issues of retention, issues of
attracting new people to the labour force.

And here is something Karthik had mentioned previously. It is indeed true in India that, for vacant teacher positions, far more applications are received than there are positions. That said, in several of the African countries we are looking at, we don’t consistently find that to be the case. We find in these country reports and in our conversations, that youth do have a lower degree of interest in joining the teaching profession.

To what extent does the evidence that we have available to us describe in detail the kinds of preparation that contract teachers receive?

AC: There is a fair bit of variation in the kinds of training contract teachers receive, both pre-service training, and in-service training. Guinea is a country which seems to do an exceptionally good job of preparing and supporting its contract teachers through systematic training modules and so forth, and consistent support as they are in their jobs. But this is not something that we find across the board. There are countries where the training could be as few as a couple of days or a few weeks and then going all the way up to a year or something more significant.

There are two other issues to note. One is that the need to hire contract teachers arises when there is a shortage. And typically, these shortages arise in locations which are most challenged. What this means is that these teachers with lower training and lower preparation are often working in what one might consider some of the most challenging areas within the country, teaching—as Karthik has mentioned—first generation learners, teaching in remote locations with few resources. And under those circumstances, it might seem especially important that they receive all the support possible to be able to effectively carry out their work.

And second, the overall quality of teacher training that is available in many of these countries seems to leave a lot to be desired. So it's not that simply having a teacher training distinguishes you to be able carry out your job very well. And that might in part explain why regular teachers, who are in fact trained, don’t seem to perform better than those who are not trained—because the quality of teacher training itself deserves closer attention.

KM: There’s an implicit assumption in the education community that a trained teacher is a better teacher. We don’t have high quality experimental evidence on this. I’ve not seen a single study that finds any meaningful positive correlation between having a formal teacher training credential and the effectiveness in the classroom. The reason we have these effects are not because contract teachers are good but because the training of the civil service teachers is really weak.

It might well be that at the primary level, what matters more is that the teacher be from the same community, is therefore much less likely to be absent, has connections to parents and children, and there’s measures of empathy. Geeta Kingdon has some work on the social distance between the teacher and the community showing that this is important.

Just to conclude our conversation. Could you tell us how do you approach, personally, this solution of contact teachers?

AC: The importance of reliance on local talent to staff schools and classrooms is crucial. The challenge in developing that local talent is then to retain the local talent. Because when people are qualified, they then are able to get transfers.
It is equally crucial to provide them with the right kind of mentoring and support, which comes through proper teacher training and which comes through proper mentorship. We don’t have systematic evidence of teacher training making a difference across most developing countries. But in the United States where people have been able to conduct good work on this, you do find that good teacher training can make a difference in improving learning outcomes of the students who study with well-trained teachers.

And ultimately even if these young men and women are hired on a contract status, it is important to think about ways in which they can be integrated or mainstreamed and brought into the fold of the regular teacher labour force.

From the long-term sustainability perspective it seems important to not have a bifurcated teacher labour force without (a mechanism for) transfer into the regular labour force. To speak to the issue of accountability, I think this is a whole other discussion which perhaps we don’t have the time to go into. Karthik rightly mentions that his data show lower absenteeism among contract teachers in India. But there are other countries—I believe, in Peru, Indonesia, and elsewhere—where that’s not necessarily the case. And so, what makes a teacher accountable? Certainly, the threat of losing your job makes anybody accountable, and I think we can all relate to that, but in my mind that’s perhaps a longer and separate discussion.

So I will make it three things: local talent pool, supporting and mentoring them, and finding ways to create pathways to join the regular teacher labour force, for those who are appropriately qualified.

Thank you Amita. Karthik, do you have any final thoughts or recommendations on this issue?

KM: A lot actually, as you can see from the detailed policy paper I have written on this! I think the evidence in my view is actually very clear, that contract teachers are a highly, highly cost-effective solution.

My personal suggestion would be to think about the contract teacher as the first step in a career ladder. So instead of thinking about this as a permanent adjunct faculty model, you want to think about this as a tenure track.

But the flip side of the situation is the problem that today you have many, many, many teachers who basically get lifetime civil service jobs without really being good teachers. Without having been tested in the classroom; without having demonstrated that they have an aptitude for the job. So, you could also make a very easy case that our current structure of recruiting is completely misguided because we’re recruiting on the basis of exams, as opposed to on the basis of classroom performance as the first step in a career ladder, sort of like an apprenticeship, with annually renewable contracts for maybe the first three or four years. And the other important thing is I would like to modularize teacher training. This goes back to some of the themes that Amita was talking about, which is, my own content analysis of teacher training programmes basically suggests that most of what we put in teacher training programs today are is theory and have no correlation with effectiveness in classroom teaching.

Whereas the best evidence we have on effective teacher training from around the world points to the value of practicum-based training, where you are interspersing classroom practice with theoretical work that allows you to make sense of the two.

So you’re paid a stipend which corresponds to the salary that the current contract teachers are
getting. So that's where the cost effectiveness comes from. You are contributing to learning by being a frontline teacher. You’re contributing to your own learning as a teacher by having this interaction between theory and practice. And then at the end of this, you basically have a practicum-based training credential. And then the important thing is that you’re not guaranteed a civil service job at the end of that. Rather what you get is you get is extra points for every year of practical service, so that at the time of regular recruitment you’re much more likely to get hired if you have been through this practicum training program. But there’s no guarantee if it turns out that you’re in fact not that effective in the classroom.

And one of the things I talk about in my paper is the option of providing an exit payment or grants for people who've gone through this programme but don't get hired. And that allows them to transition. Like perhaps to finding jobs in private schools and other areas. The paper does more of this, but I just wanted to put this out there: that the evidence on contract teachers is positive, but that doesn't give us what is needed, as to how to take this evidence and put it in a policy framework. And what I've tried to do with the policy paper is roughly along the lines of what I've just discussed.

Further resources


Muralidharan, K. 2015. A new approach to public sector hiring in India for improved service delivery.