

Understanding the Invisible Workforce: Education Support Personnel's roles, Needs and the Challenges they Face

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2019. World ESP Day | 16th May

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Education Support Personnel (ESP) cover a broad range of professional, administrative, technical and general staff working within the education sector, such as teaching assistants, school nurses and psychologists, bursars, and bus drivers, amongst others. They are vital in their contribution to quality education, including safe and positive learning environments. However, as ESP cover a broad and diverse range of job categories and their role in supporting quality education is often overlooked, there is currently very little research about ESP as a workforce and their professional needs.

As a result, Education International commissioned research to explore the role, impact, status, and employment conditions of education support personnel. A survey was administered to ESP in 7 case study countries:

- » Brazil,
- » Canada (Quebec),
- » France,
- » New Zealand,
- » The Philippines,
- » United States of America, and
- » Zimbabwe

In total, **3,012 ESP** around the world responded to the survey. In addition, union leaders in each country responded to a survey about union support for ESP.

This leaflet summarises some of the key findings of the research, provides recommendations for union advocacy, and makes the case for unions to strengthen their support for ESP.

WHO ARE ESP?

Typical ESP profiles around the world

	Brazil	Quebec	France	New Zealand	Philippines	US	Zimbabwe
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male
Age	36-60	31-50	46-60	46-60	21-40	46-65	36-50
Employment contract	Permanent, full time	Permanent, full time	Permanent, full time	Term-time employment on a part time basis	Permanent, full-time	Full-time employment on an hourly wage basis	Permanent, full-time
Earnings (\$ per year)	<15 000	No data	<34,000	<20,000	<2,580	20,000 – 25,000	<5,000

Across the world, many ESP are women aged 40-60 years, who are likely to be in caring roles in their families – either caring for their children or caring for older family members. Yet employment conditions are often poor. Most ESP are poorly paid, earning less than the average wage for their country and some have precarious work conditions.



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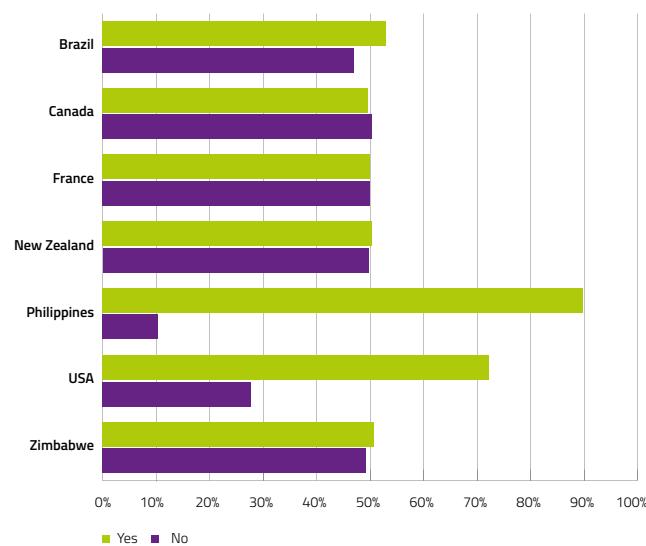
WHAT CHALLENGES DO ESP FACE? VOICES FROM EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION – ESP EXPERIENCES 1

Little recognition

Most ESP surveyed felt society as a whole accorded them average or low status and that the low recognition that they received for their work did not match the energy and commitment they put into it. The majority of ESP felt that their work was respected by teachers, leaders and parents, but many noted a lack of recognition for their contribution to student learning or quality education more broadly. Many also highlighted a lack of understanding for the challenges they faced in their work or as a result of their employment conditions. Most ESP felt they had some autonomy within their individual practice, but many felt they were excluded from decision making processes in their workplace.

- » "We are the ghosts of the school units, we do not go to meetings and we do not know anything at school". (Brazil #522, Security)
- » "[School leaders] don't understand or even know what a lot of paraeducators have to do on a daily basis". (USA #40, Teaching and Learning Assistant)
- » "We are unfortunately all too often seen as babysitters and yet we are trained as educators". (Canada #253, Teaching and Learning Assistant)

Figure 1: Ability to participate in decision-making, across the case study countries



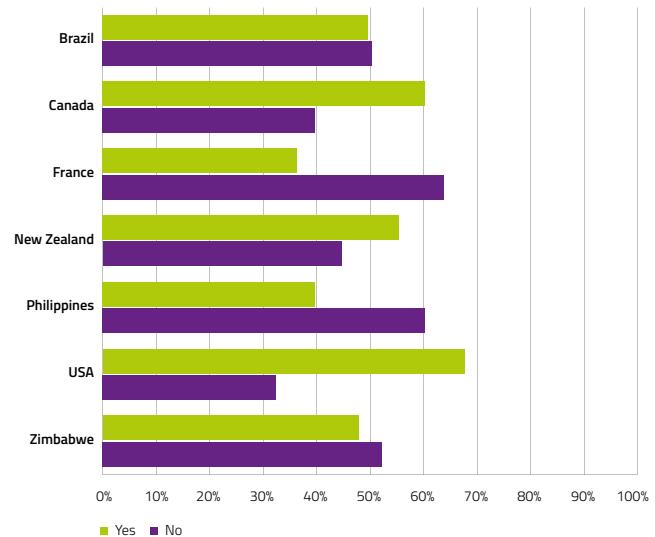
Precarious work

Though many ESP have permanent full time contracts, there are also many ESP who are worried about the permanence or long-term security of their jobs as a result of tenuous, short-term employment contracts that do not offer job security or a career path. Education privatisation, changing government policy, austerity and outsourcing were mentioned as factors that led to precarious employment conditions. For example, some ESP are hired only during term time or are rehired each year at short notice dependent on funding and student numbers.

» "Our jobs are precarious. We know a few weeks in advance what position we will occupy for the school year. Each year, the number of positions decreases, despite the fact that the needs increase". (Canada #268, Teaching and Learning Assistant)

- » "The threat of outsourcing is a constant. The school boards need to realize that the care a local employee has for their students cannot be matched by someone just wanting any job". (USA #1, Teaching and Learning Assistant)
- » "most of the time I work over-time, the hours are not paid. I do not get paid during the holidays" (Zimbabwe #46, Health and Welfare)

Figure 2: Sense of job security, across the case study countries



1 NB: no open-ended responses were received from the Philippines

Unclear career pathways

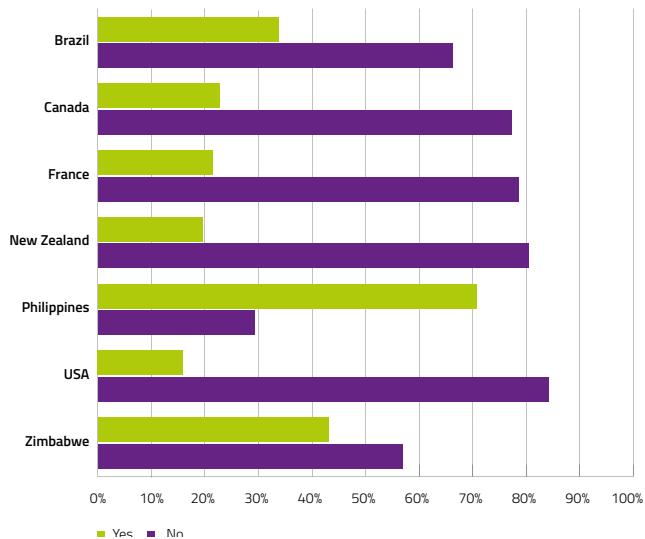
In most countries, the majority of ESP felt they were likely or very likely to remain in the same or a similar job in five years' time, indicating that for each ESP, they view their role as a long-term career. However, most felt they did not have opportunities for promotion or career progression. They are often working in a role unrelated to their highest qualification.

» **"I would love the opportunity for some kind of promotion. I love my job, and give it my all, but there are no opportunities to progress".** (NZ #396, Teaching and Learning Assistant)

» **"There is no opportunity for promotion because there is no ladder for going up. No opportunity for studying higher because there is no room for study leave with pay".** (Zimbabwe #26, Technician)

» **"Advancements are complicated, and complex. The school head does not support training. He asks us to do the training in addition to our work, which triples our working time, without compensation".** (France #33, Teaching and Learning Assistant)

Figure 3: Opportunities for promotion or higher responsibilities, across the case study countries

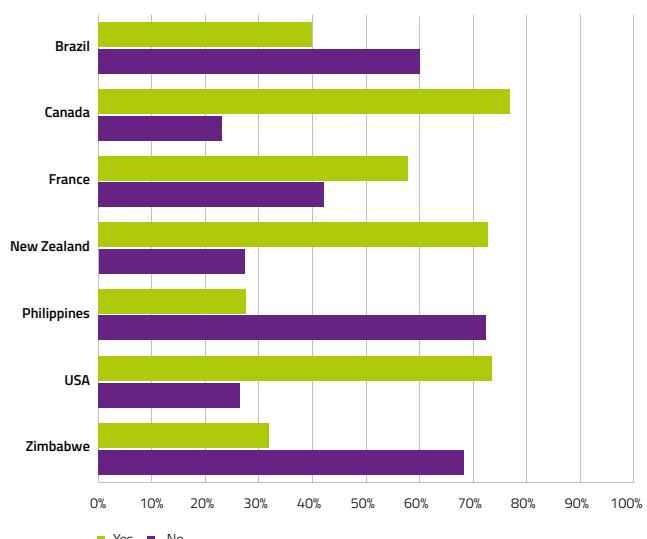


Little or no access to CPLD

Access to formal continuous professional learning and development (CPLD) development opportunities was variable across the seven countries. However, where ESP did have access, these opportunities tended to occur only once a year and were not systematic or linked to career progression.

» **"Very infrequently is [C]PLD made available. But because there is no structured career path the [C] PLD ties into nothing or builds towards nothing".** (NZ #927, Teaching and Learning Assistant)

Figure 4: Access to formal professional learning and development, across the case study countries



Key challenges

- » Low status
- » Poor pay
- » Precarious employment
- » Little opportunity for promotion
- » Infrequent PLD
- » Little involvement in workplace decisions

ESP: MOTIVATED BY KNOWING THEY MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Even if many ESP feel undervalued and feel that their contribution is not adequately recognised, most ESP felt they made a big difference for teachers and students. They were confident in their roles and satisfied with their jobs, motivated by the impact they have on students.

» **"The most beautiful thing that holds us to this profession is the students who appreciate us and clearly demonstrate it to us. This is our best pay."** (Canada #208, Teaching and Learning Assistant)

» **"The most motivating part of my work is interacting with students, the bond of affection with them, friendship, respect, exchange of experiences. In other words, the human side of education."** (Brazil #256, Administrator)

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WHAT CAN WE DO?

The survey shows that there is a mismatch between the low status of ESP and the important contribution they make to the education community. There is a clear case for union advocacy on behalf of ESP. We must act now.

Unions should:

- » **Support ESP to know their legal rights.** Provide information, disseminate materials, and conduct training.
- » **Advocate for ESP to have permanent positions and higher salaries**
- » **Advocate for better working conditions for ESP.**
In particular, ESP want:
 - Job security
 - To be paid all year round
 - Access to benefits such as sick leave
- » **Advocate for increased awareness of ESP roles and employment conditions amongst teachers and principals**
- » **Advocate for professional learning and development opportunities for ESP and for increased qualifications to be tied to increases in salary;**
- » **Advocate for career progression opportunities for ESP**
- » **Celebrate the work of ESP in supporting students and creating well-functioning educational institutions.**
Spread awareness of who ESP are and their contribution to quality education. Join Education International in celebrating World ESP day on May 16th.