

Scaling Inclusive Teacher Professional Development in Rwanda (SITPDR)

Equity & inclusion in Teacher Professional Development: Placing women teachers and teachers with disabilities at the centre of large-scale Teacher Professional Development in Rwanda

A Policy Paper

Introduction

Large-scale Teacher Professional Development (TPD) programmes often use a mix of types of learning such as face to face, online and school-based CPD (blended learning) to reach large numbers of teachers in sustainable value-for-money ways. Ensuring fairness (equity) and inclusion of all teachers within at-scale TPD can be more challenging. Women teachers (WT) and teachers with disabilities (TWD) in rural contexts can be left out from TPD because social norms do not treat women and people with disability well or equally. Large-scale TPD may also not have enough focus on specific needs of individuals. When TPD recognises and addresses such needs, even at scale, the benefits for all teachers are great.

This policy paper presents findings from a research project (2024-2026) that evaluated the large-scale Secondary Teacher English Improvement Rwanda programme (STELIR) that aimed to improve the English language proficiency of over 10,081 Lower Secondary School Teachers

in mostly rural schools in Rwanda. The programme put in place adaptations to support WT and TWD to access the training. While these two groups of teachers benefitted from STELIR, some challenges remained, notably at the school-based part (component).

This policy paper suggests possible changes to TPD with advice or suggestions for stakeholders at school, district, and national systems level to strengthen teacher education and move towards greater equity and inclusion within large-scale TPD and school-based CPD.

Context of Rwanda

Rwanda has improved access to school for girls and recognises the importance of having WT as female role models for keeping girls in school. The numbers of WT in education are increasing as more women gain higher education. However, at secondary education WT are only 35% of the teaching workforce (MINEDUC, 2024a). Deeply rooted social and cultural norms give women the dual burden of caregiving and professional duties which limit their ability to attend time intensive TPD (Mumporeze & Prieler, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2024). Most WT are under 35 with young families and many, up to 40% in our sample, live some distance away from the schools they work in. With short maternity leaves, WT must balance care of their babies with teaching when they return to work, especially in rural areas.

Accurate data on how much disability there is in Rwanda varies, with underreporting due to cultural stigma against people with disabilities. Such amounts can be from 3.4% to as high as 17–19% among adults, depending on whether self-reporting or household reporting was used (Access to Finance Rwanda, 2021). Few children with disabilities attend or complete school, and mainstream schools are not always accessible for these students. Consequently, numbers of TWD are very low and many of those who graduate from the University of Rwanda College of Education as secondary school teachers are placed either into Special Schools or move away from teaching altogether. Inclusive training programmes centre on children rather than TWD, while there are few opportunities to attend TPD for TWD (Njelesani et al. 2018; Lewis et al., 2019).

The Rwandan competency-based, student-centred curriculum was introduced in 2016, with English as language of instruction from 2009 (MINEDUC 2024). This linguistic shift can be difficult for teachers who speak the national language of Kinyarwanda in daily interactions. Women in rural areas are further disadvantaged as they hear less English spoken around them (Milligan et al. 2023; Westbrook et al. 2025).

Alignment of research with the new CPD framework

The research supports the new CPD framework from the Rwandan Education Board, sharing its goal of improving teacher quality, motivation and professionalism and principles of inclusive and equitable CPD to take place in the required weekly slot for all schools.

Secondary Teachers English Language Improvement Rwanda - TPD programme at scale

The [Secondary Teachers English Language Improvement Rwanda](#) (STELIR) is funded by the Mastercard Foundation and implemented by the British Council in partnership with the Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB) and University of Rwanda, College of Education (URCE). The programme runs in almost half of the districts in Rwanda (14 out of 30) over several training cycles. Out of the 10,081 participants on STELIR, some 37% of participants are female, while 76% of participants live and work in rural areas. Importantly, 6,002 participants are young, under 35. Only 524 teachers self-identified as having an impairment, but these were most often moderate, such as needing glasses or a hearing aid.

STELIR's blended approach to TPD at scale has three training parts which are different according to the skill level of English of the participants (A0/A1, A2 and B1). The content of the training is relevant to teachers' contexts and the teaching methods used in the face to face and online learning are very interactive with many games to encourage conversational English.

Each component had specific changes or adaptations designed to support WT and TWD:

Table 1: The three parts of STELIR

Component 1	Component 2	Component 3
Face to face interactive training – 1 or 2 weeks Residential course held in a Teacher Training College	Online self-study Units from REB Moodle site for 20 weeks & real time online weekend meetings of 1.5 hours	School-based training delivered by a mentor in Wednesday afternoon CPD slots for 5 months
Adaptations for women teachers: Creches, travel allowances for nannies, food and sleeping arrangements fit for babies. Adaptations for teachers with disabilities: Inclusive teaching methods; assistive technology, specialist transport and guides for TWD.	Adaptations for all: Tablets, headphones, internet bundles loaned for the length of the online learning. Adaptation for women: Women-only WhatsApp support groups	Adaptations School-based mentor trained by STELIR delivers STELIR training manual to all staff
All trainers, tutors and e-moderators underwent training to ensure their teaching methods included WT and TWD.		

Aims and methods of the research project, Scaling Inclusive Teacher Professional Development in Rwanda (SITPDR)

This research looked at how WT and TWD accessed and engaged with STELIR, particularly the school-based component. As part of the larger [Empowering Teachers Initiative](#), the research also considers issues around how TPD works when scaled up across a country, its value for money in terms of financial and human costs of the programme, and how these link to quality of learning and equity.

Research Questions

The research asked three main questions:

1. How are women teachers and teachers with disabilities supported to access the large-scale STELIR programme?
2. What are the benefits teachers gain from this TPD over time and what challenges do they encounter as they complete the programme?
3. What are the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders particularly at school level in supporting the development of whole school models of CPD to ensure greater equity and inclusion for women teachers and teachers with disability?

Research methods

This project had three main phases to it.

Firstly, we carried out 24 interviews with system level people, such as the Rwanda Education Board (REB), District Education Officers (DEOs) and Sector Education Inspectors (SEIs). We then carried out case studies of 10 Lower Secondary schools in three Districts where STELIR was first rolled out in Gicumbi, Nyarugugu and Rusizi. Out of 66 participants, we were most interested to hear the voices of 29 WT in public schools and four TWD who worked in special schools. The research team returned to these same schools a year later to talk to teachers about the longer-term impact of STELIR.

Secondly, we held a series of workshops in each District to feedback findings from the case studies. We also held a two-day workshop in Kigali for participants from the case study schools, Districts and national level to work together to act on these findings and produce a 'Visual Guide to support equitable, inclusive whole school CPD'.

Thirdly, we carried out Participatory Action Research (PAR) in nine further schools in Kayanza, Nyanza and Musanze Districts, talking to 65 participants, mostly WT and mentors. Researchers worked with mentors to consider changes and ideas from the *Visual Guide* they thought important for their schools, adding these to the whole school CPD action plans. The mentors worked with their colleagues to test out these changes in their schools over three months. Finally, we held a workshop in Kigali in January 2026 with participants from across the whole

research project to agree on recommendations for actions to improve equity and inclusion in schools at school, district and national level.

Research Findings

Impact of changes made by STELIR on participants' access and engagement

The practical changes STELIR put in place for WT, such as creches, travel cover for nannies, training in digital literacy and loan of hardware, helped WT to attend the face to face and the online training. Women could learn away from home knowing their children were safely looked after and nearby. TWD could access the learning as equal colleagues because of the assistive technology, guides to help them move around at training venues and specialist transport they were offered by STELIR. Schools also made some local changes to support their teachers on STELIR. For example, school-based mentors (SBMs) taught the STELIR content for CPD. Some schools provided time and space for WT to study together online at work rather than have to study alone at night. TWD adapted the STELIR training material to work with specific disabilities.

Despite these changes, many WT found it difficult to access the learning on STELIR. Many had to reorder their domestic lives and childcare arrangements to make time for night and weekend study. Tablets and internet bundles provided could not overcome challenges of being connected to electricity and the internet in rural areas (See Barayagwiza et al. 2026). WT had to cost share to participate, sometimes paying a housekeeper to look after their children while they were away. TWD had to provide their own laptops and assistive devices to participate before STELIR made further changes. Some participants did not take part or found it difficult to properly learn with the online learning at weekends. Participants also were unhappy that they had to return their tablets at the end of the online course, and the end of unlimited internet access.

'Pausing childcare and household duties affected children's health and wellbeing' Woman teacher from Rusizi

Positive impact of STELIR on levels of English and classroom practices over time

There were immediate benefits from STELIR. Participants said they used spoken English much more frequently at school and in their lesson and felt much more confident in doing so. Teachers interviewed also said that their classroom practices had improved. These benefits increased and expanded over the year. Those who had attended STELIR were more willing to share their knowledge of the programme with colleagues. WT also participated more in CPD:

Table 2: Expected and unintended benefits of STELIR

Intended benefits of STELIR a year later	Unexpected benefits of STELIR a year later
Increased levels of English skill and confidence in using the language English used more often in classrooms Wider use of English around the school & community Mentors improved their ability to plan and carry out CPD well	Improved knowledge of the subject teachers taught from having carried out online research Greater use of technology by teachers for lesson planning & delivery Improved classroom practices including more use of group work & games Improvement in reported student outcomes through tests and examinations Greater sense of community of practice & knowledge sharing amongst staff Greater involvement by head teachers in CPD & school action plans Women teachers take on more leadership roles within CPD & school

Clearly, teachers learnt a great deal from STELIR, including those in rural areas, despite its scale, length of the course and demands on participants' time.

The extent and nature of any knowledge-sharing amongst teachers

Teachers from the case study schools said that heavy workloads, low motivation and hesitation by teachers with poorer English to speak out, initially stopped colleagues from easily sharing their learning from STELIR with their colleagues. A year later, however, teachers were happier to share with colleagues their improved subject knowledge and English use, both in the staff room and departmental meetings. WT took on more leadership roles in the weekly CPD sessions. Communities of Practice within schools developed over the year, benefiting all teachers, but trainee teachers and those who missed CPD through sickness or caring responsibilities particularly benefitted.

Challenges for equitable CPD at school level

However, there were major challenges for fairer learning for all at the weekly CPD slot. These challenges were stated many times by respondents across Phases 2, 3 and 4:

Organisation of CPD

- Lack of a good space for all school staff to meet in, and limited internet connection;
- Plans for CPD can be upset at short notice by other school activities;

- A lack of basic rewards like water, refreshments or notebooks kept some teachers away at the end of a busy day of teaching;
- Some CPD activities focused on social or local issues unrelated to the teaching profession.

Monitoring and evaluation of CPD

- Head teachers were busy with competing demands on their time and not always directly involved or attended CPD;
- SEIs and DEOs did not have enough time or funding to follow up on CPD activities in schools;
- DEOs and SEIs did not always know much about STELIR as a programme and its school-based component.

Challenges faced by women teachers

- Some male teachers and head teachers held negative attitudes and expectations about women, for example, thinking women are 'naturally hesitant and timid'. This made WT feel unconfident in speaking out in CPD sessions;
- WT faced additional challenges in attending the fixed times given for CPD as they had caregiving and domestic duties to attend to that male colleagues did not have;
- The short maternity leave meant that WT were still breastfeeding as they returned to work. As most schools did not have a room that could be used for breastfeeding, WT had to travel back and forth to their homes to breastfeed or feed their young babies in a quiet corner of the school, brought to them by their nannies.

Challenges faced by teachers with disability

- Some teachers and head teachers considered that TWD are physically unable to teach, even when TWD are fully capable of doing so. This stopped fair recruitment of TWD to mainstream schools;
- Most TWD are placed in Special Schools under the mistaken belief that they are best placed to teach children with disabilities in more accessible schools;
- Training venues are not always within easy reach for TWD nor schools, despite government policies that require schools to make straightforward reasonable adjustments such as putting in ramps and railing to help TWD and children with disabilities.

Participatory Action Research to explore the wider impact of moving towards more equitable models of whole school CPD

Researchers worked with mentors in nine more schools to test out actions and changes that could solve some of these challenges listed above, and which could make CPD more inclusive. Mentors used some of the ideas from the 'Visual Guide to support equitable, inclusive whole school CPD' to help them. There were three key actions that most schools agreed on. These key actions each created the conditions in schools for further changes to be made:

Table 3: Key actions by head teachers

	Creates conditions for further changes	Specific examples of changes made in schools
1. Head teachers are more involved in CPD	Joint planning	Director of Studies & Mentor jointly plan CPD
	Change of beliefs around purpose & benefits of CPD increased teacher attendance at CPD	- Head Teacher and Director of Studies encourage teachers to attend CPD -Greater use of group work & discussion in CPD
	Teachers are more supported	-Mentor works with subject departments and individuals -Mentor shares notes of CPD on social network platform to support teachers who miss CPD
	Mentors increase their professional skills and status especially when their workload is reduced	Mentor gains confidence from STELIR training & joint role.

Table 4: Key actions - Women teachers are more involved in CPD

	Creates conditions for further changes	Specific examples of changes made in schools
2. Women teachers are more involved in CPD	Equal access & participation in CPD for WT	Schools encourage women's participation in CPD Women teachers take up leadership roles in CPD
	More awareness within the school about issues and beliefs that affect women teachers	Increased follow up on women teachers who miss CPD

		Flexible times for breastfeeding & for WT to carry out caring responsibilities Head teachers and mentors think about putting in place a women's room at school
	Increased confidence in the capabilities of women teachers	Male colleagues & headteachers positively change their views of women teachers' abilities Women teachers become role models for others

Table 5: Key actions - Increased use of English in CPD

3.English is used much more in CPD and around the school	Creates conditions for further changes	Specific examples of changes made in schools
	Women teachers gain confidence in using English	Teachers use English much more as language of instruction in teaching Teachers use English in social media, e.g. teachers' WhatsApp groups
	Primary & secondary teachers benefit from practising English together	Schools learning together with primary and secondary school teacher brought together for CPD
	More confident teachers support less confident teachers in speaking English	Teachers are more willing to practise English together & to learn from one another
	There is an increase in informal knowledge sharing	Discussions at departmental level & in the staff room discussions are conducted in spoken English

Importantly, these actions shifted some of the negative attitudes around WT and gave them the time and space to speak up at CPD and take on further leadership roles.

Final Workshop to develop key suggestions

Stakeholders from different participant groups in the research worked together to think about which actions taken by schools that had the highest impact and which also had the lowest costs.

Actions that can contribute to increases in equity and inclusion in CPD:

High impact and low cost

- District Education Officers and Sector Education Inspectors have better knowledge of TPD programmes at scale in their Districts and monitor school based CPD
- Head teachers are involved in the planning and attendance of CPD
- Staff consistently use English for teaching and in CPD
- Women teachers are encouraged to speak out and present in CPD and to take on leadership roles

High impact with relatively higher costs

- A women's room is organised at each school for WT with babies
- Teachers with disability are recruited to mainstream schools
- School leaders support reasonable adjustments that TWD need so that they can teach at mainstream schools.

Recommendations to develop more equitable and inclusive CPD

School level

The Head teacher should:

- Receive training in the new CPD framework from REB;
- Plan for CPD with the CPD coordinator and Director of Study;
- Minimise upsets to planned CPD;
- Attend CPD events, encourages all staff to participate and monitors CPD attendance;
- Work with the District Education Officer and Sector Education Inspector to request for the resources to provide a good space with resources for CPD;
- Work with the DEO and SEI to provide a women's room at their school;
- Act as a role model in giving WT and TWD leadership roles and the time and space to speak out;
- Support TWD who are transferred to their school and talks with the TWD to work out any support plans for them.

The CPD Coordinator:

- Plans CPD jointly with the Head Teacher and Director of Study;
- Uses the 'Visual Guide to support equitable, inclusive whole school CPD' to ensure WT and TWD are included in CPD;
- Encourages WT to attend, to speak up without fear and to present at CPD sessions;
- Shares notes from CPDs and uploads to a social network platform to support teachers who miss CPD;
- Supports individual teachers in their professional development, especially WT returning from maternity leave;
- Recognises the importance of knowledge sharing and learning at departmental level.

The Director of Studies:

- Plans CPD with the CPD Coordinator and head teacher;
- Encourages WT to attend CPD and to take up leadership roles.

District and Sector level

District level:

- District Education Officers make closer links with schools in their Districts and take on a formal reporting role for CPD;

Sector level:

- Sector Education Inspectors takes on a support role to recognise and remove barriers and cultural stigmas for WT and TWD.
- Sector Education Inspectors work with headteachers to support WT to safely speak up and take on leadership roles.

National level

MINEDUC

- Carries out the planning and budgeting to set up women's rooms in schools and the space and educational technology needed for CPD;
- Takes on the costs for assistive technology for TWD and other reasonable adjustments;
- Revises recruitment policies to ensure fairer recruitment and deployment of TWD into mainstream schools.

Rwanda Education Board:

- Ensures that CPD-related activities are included in school leaders' performance contract
- Implements clear policies to support TWD to access university and teacher training and get work in mainstream schools as well as special schools;
- Enhances their implementation and monitoring role around gender and disability in CPD

Acknowledgements

Funding for this study was received from Foundation for Information Technology-Education and Development (FIT-ED) as part of the Empowering Teachers Initiative (ETI). The grant number is ETI-032023-BCR. The head contract is between FIT-ED and the Canadian Government's International Development Research Council (IDRC).

References

- Access to Finance Rwanda. (2021). *FinScope Rwanda 2020: Persons with Disabilities Thematic Report*. <https://afr.rw/downloads/finscope-2020-persons-with-disabilities-thematic-report/>
- Barayagwiza, P., Mukingambeho, D., Rubagiza, J., Simpson, J., Wekesa, A. & Westbrook, J. (2026) Adapting emerging technologies to the lives and needs of women teachers and teachers with disability in Rwanda: a case study of iterative change and development, *East China Normal University Review of Education*, Issue/Vol
- British Council (2025) Innovations in teacher professional development in Rwanda: Including all teachers *Policy Paper* August 2025, British Council Rwanda
- Lewis, I., et al. (2019). Teacher education for disability inclusion: A global analysis. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 68, 1–10.
- Milligan, E., Dorimana, A., Uwizeyemariya, A., Uworwabayeho, A., Sprague, T., Adamson, L., & Kuchah Kuchah, H. (2023). Umuzigo w'inyongera: Girls' differential experiences of the double burden of language and gender in Rwandan English medium secondary education. *Language and Education*, 1-16.
- MINEDUC 2024 *Foundational Learning Strategy: 2024/25 – 2028/29* (Republic of Rwanda: Kigali)
- MINEDUC. (2024a). 2023/2024 Education Statistical Yearbook. Kigali, Ministry of Education.

Mitchell, R., Ayinselya, R. A., Barrett, A. M., Cortez Ochoa, A. A., David, O., Imaniriho, D., Nwako, Z. A., Reda, N. W., & Singh, M. (2024). *Teacher professional development in Africa: A critical synthesis of research evidence*. British Council Rwanda
https://www.britishcouncil.rw/sites/default/files/20240708_stelir_teacher_professional_development_in_africa_mitchell_et_al_2024.pdf

Mumporeze, N., & Prieler, M. (2017). Gender digital divide in Rwanda: A qualitative analysis of socioeconomic factors. *Telematics and Informatics*, 34(7), 1285–1293.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2017.05.014>.

Njelesani, J., Siegel, J., & Ullrich, E. (2018). Disability and education policy in Rwanda: A critical review. *Disability & Society*, 33(10), 1573–1590.

Westbrook, J., Simpson, J. with Barayagwiza, P., Mukingambeho, D., Rubagiza, J. (2025) Navigating language barriers between formal education and community at the Rwanda-DRC border, *NORRAG Special Issue Number 11: Multilingualism and Language Transition: Innovations and Possibilities*