

Innovations in teacher professional development in Rwanda: Including all teachers

Policy Paper

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Introduction and context

Improving teachers' proficiency in English has been identified as a key intervention for strengthening learning outcomes in Rwanda (Republic of Rwanda Ministry of Education, 2024). The Secondary Teachers English Language Improvement Rwanda (STELIR) project is a collaboration with the Mastercard Foundation and implemented by the British Council in partnership with the Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB). This paper sets out the policy implications of findings from STELIR on innovative approaches to ensuring that all teachers benefit from quality professional development.

English has been one of the possible languages of learning and teaching (LOLT) in Rwandan schools since 1996. It has been the sole LOLT for upper primary and secondary since 2011, and for lower primary since 2020.¹ But teachers' proficiency in English remains limited.

Rwanda has made good progress in improving gender equity in the education system. However, gender disparities remain in access to higher education and in the education workforce. At the secondary level, only 35% of teachers are female (Republic of Rwanda Ministry of Education, 2025). Addressing gender inequity is a strategic priority of

Rwanda's 2024-2029 Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP).

The Government of Rwanda is committed to the inclusion of learners with disabilities in the education system. Rwanda's ESSP includes support to inclusive education as a key intervention, and the Ministry of Education regularly publishes data on the inclusion of learners with disabilities and other special needs. However, there is no mention of teachers with disabilities in education policies (Singal et al., 2024) and official statistics (Republic of Rwanda Ministry of Education, 2025).

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is at the heart of Rwanda's vision for social and economic transformation. The ESSP is based on the premise that ICT should play a significant role in the development of the education system. ICT offers huge potential for delivering cost-effective teacher professional development (TPD) at scale, as previously demonstrated by Rwanda's Building Learning Foundations programme (TPD@Scale Coalition for the Global South, 2022). This paper examines how ICT-enabled teacher development programmes can be adapted to be gender responsive and disability inclusive.

¹ In 2008/9, English was made the sole LOLT from the start of primary education; however, in 2011 Kinyarwanda was reinstated as LOLT in lower primary.

The need for gender responsive and inclusive teacher professional development in English

A recent learning assessment (National Examination and School Inspection Authority, 2023) found that less than half (47%) of learners in the third year of secondary school met the basic proficiency level expected in English. Female learners performed significantly worse than males (40% compared to 51%). The ESSP identifies teachers' limited fluency in English as one of the main barriers, with only 4% of primary teachers and 38% of secondary teachers meeting the minimum English proficiency standards in 2018 (Republic of Rwanda Ministry of Education, 2024).

Female teachers at the secondary level are not only outnumbered by males, they are also disadvantaged by lower levels of English. Baseline data from STELIR indicate that female teachers were less likely than their male counterparts to demonstrate “independent user”

level² of English proficiency, with similar gender gaps being observed among pre-service teachers (see figure 2).

Female teachers in Africa face a range of gendered barriers to participating in professional development (Mitchell et al., 2024). Many of these stem from the fact that women tend to bear an inequitable burden of domestic responsibilities, including childcare and household chores. These responsibilities, in addition to their teaching role, leave female teachers with very little available time for professional development. Women tend to have less availability to study during evenings and weekends. When participating in distance learning from home, female teachers can face distractions and interruptions, such as taking care of their children or dealing with unscheduled visits from family and friends. Child-care responsibilities can likewise make it challenging

² STELIR measures English proficiency using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for language. Levels A0-A2 are for basic users, B1 - B2 for independent users and C1-C2 for proficient users.



for females to travel to in-person training (Ecctis, 2024). There is also evidence of a gendered digital divide in Rwanda, with females having less access to and experience of using digital devices. Women's domestic burden is one of the main reasons given for this inequity (Mumporeze & Prieler, 2017). A recent study in Rwanda found that female secondary teachers had less access to computers than their male counterparts (Laterite and the REAL centre at the University of Cambridge, 2023). Some of the female participants in STELIR needed additional support to develop the digital skills necessary to access the online learning element.

A multi-country study of the experiences of teachers with disabilities noted that in Rwanda, as in other countries, teacher training and professional development systems are rarely adapted to

accommodate the needs of teachers with disabilities (Singal et al., 2024). Official data on teachers with disabilities in Rwanda are not available, and less than 2% of students in tertiary education are recorded as having a disability. However, around 5% of teachers responding to STELIR's survey of participants identified as having a disability. A process evaluation identified a range of barriers to participation in both on-line and in-person training (Ecctis, 2024).

By taking a gender equality, disability and social inclusion approach, STELIR has provided an opportunity to better understand the barriers faced by marginalised teachers, and to develop innovative approaches to enable all teachers to benefit from quality professional development.

A blended training approach to teacher professional development at scale

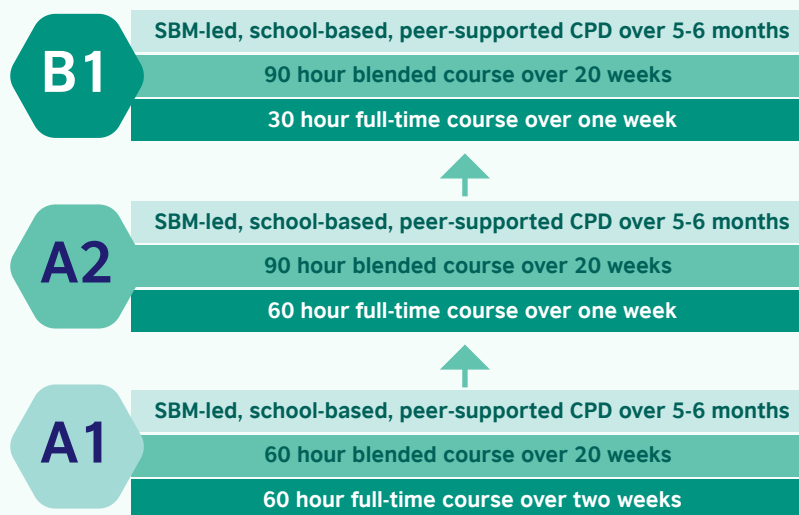
STELIR aims to improve the English language proficiency of Lower Secondary Teachers in the Rwandan state education system, reaching 6,598 in-service teachers across 14 districts, and 2,381 pre-service teachers in training. It uses a blended delivery model, combining intensive in-person language training with an on-line course and continuous professional development (CPD) led by School-Based Mentors (SBMs) at schools. On entry to the programme, teachers take the British Council's Aptis for Teachers test to gauge their level of English proficiency, and are then offered blended English language courses at the appropriate level (see figure 1 on the next page).

The STELIR design uses ICT to deliver teacher development at scale. For the 60-90 hours online course, participants are loaned devices (laptops) and provided with data bundles, digital skills training and on-going support to enable them to access online self-paced course materials and weekly live sessions. ICT is also used to support the development of virtual professional learning communities (PLCs) using social media apps.

Key to the success and sustainability of STELIR is the design, recruitment and management of the STELIR training team (see box 1). Most team members are embedded within the Rwandan education system. The Rwandan team is supported by experienced international e-trainers who deliver online sessions and mentor STELIR eTMs. As the course has progressed the eTMs have transitioned from a role shadowing the experienced e-trainers to gradually taking on the lead for delivery of the sessions, transitioning to a sustainable, Rwanda-education-system-led model.

STELIR has taken a system-wide approach by establishing training teams and materials serving pre-service as well as serving teachers. The STELIR course at University of Rwanda College of Education (URCE) will ensure that future generations of Rwandan teachers enter the profession as competent English speakers, equipped with skills in digital learning that they can use to continue to build their competencies throughout their professional lives.

STELIR Learning Paths



Box 1: STELIR training team

English Teacher Trainers (ETTs): recruited from teacher training colleges (TTCs) and secondary schools to deliver face-to face training

School Based Mentors (SBMs): deliver weekly skills sessions in schools

e-Teacher Moderators (eTM): teachers and tutors recruited and trained to support delivery of the online course.

International e-Trainers: deliver initial rounds of online courses with gradual handover to eTMs.

Figure 1: STELIR Learning Paths

Successes of the STELIR approach

After completion of the first two phases of STELIR, 95% of inservice participants, and 97% of pre-service participants had reached Independent user (B1) level or above in English. Retention and completion rates were high, with an average completion rate of 92% for the on-line elements. Participants' score for speaking increased by 37 percentage points on average, and by 40 percentage points for female participants. Figure 2 below shows the progress made by participants during the first phase.

In 2024 the British Council commissioned a process evaluation of the on-line element of STELIR involving a survey (192 respondents), interviews with over 100 participants and observations of training sessions (Ecctis, 2024). As well as improvements to their English language skills, participants reported:

- increased confidence;
- improved pedagogical skills;

- strengthened digital skills;
- improved social and time management skills; and
- development of a 'new culture' of independent and autonomous learning.

Teachers particularly appreciated the content, structure and teaching methodologies of the on-line course. The evaluation noted that it was:

- contextually relevant;
- constructivist in approach; and
- supported collaborative learning.

The evaluation also noted a high uptake of the ongoing ICT support function, with the majority of participants using the STELIR phone helpline (57%) and the WhatsApp community (73%) to request technical support.

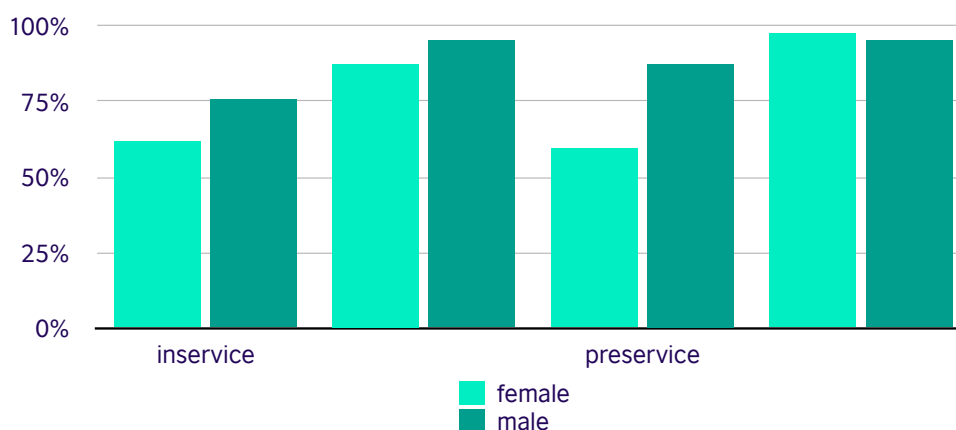


Figure 2: proportion of trainees demonstrating Level B (independent user) or above in English speaking from phase 1 of STELIR.



Supporting gender equity and inclusion in Teacher Professional Development innovation processes

The STELIR programme design and delivery is gender responsive, employing multiple innovations to address gendered barriers to participation. These included:

- purposefully selecting female trainers;
- supporting the development of female trainers to achieve gender balance in team leadership roles;
- training STELIR ETTs and eTMs in techniques to facilitate equal participation in speaking practice and group discussions;
- conducting a gender review of materials;
- conducting a gender analysis of English proficiency data;
- providing in-person digital skills training to ensure that all participants could access the online course;
- supporting female teachers to attend the course by discussing their needs during a personalised phone call and providing comprehensive support, including those needing childcare support to attend face-to-face training; and
- facilitating dedicated female PLCs through social media (WhatsApp), where female eTMs helped female teachers overcome participation barriers.

As well as the gender responsive design, STELIR took an adaptive management approach, responding to gender specific needs as they became apparent. For example, targeted activities were designed to address the gender gaps that became apparent from the placement test results; and feedback from the female WhatsApp groups informed adjustments such as schedule changes to boost participation.

Female participants, both in-service and pre-service teachers, demonstrated higher completion rates for the on-line courses and greater improvement in their English Language teaching test scores than male participants, closing the gender gaps noted at baseline. This demonstrates that female teachers, given the right support, can overcome the multiple gendered barriers that they face in professional development, and can excel. Female pre-service teachers, who tended to have fewer domestic responsibilities, improved more than female in-service teachers, indicating that managing the domestic burden continues to hamper female teachers' professional development. Even with these gender responsive strategies in place, female teachers still found it challenging to access the on-line course due to time constraints and domestic responsibilities and tended to prefer the in-person delivery mode.



All ETTs and eTMs were trained in inclusive teaching techniques. While adaptations for inclusion of teachers with disabilities were not built into design to the same extent as gender responsiveness, this is in part due to the lack of official data on this cohort. A small group of visually impaired teachers who contributed to the process evaluation noted the following.

- Online training sessions were not fully accessible, and not all support systems were initially available. For example, some teachers with visual impairment were unable to join virtual breakout rooms.
- Materials and resources, including the assessment tasks were initially inaccessible to visually impaired participants.
- Accessibility support software (for example voice recognition, audio description, text to speech software etc.), whilst available on the tablets and laptops provided, was not explicitly designed into the online course materials.
- Teachers with disabilities did not receive additional assistance for course assignments.
- The data bundles provided for participants were not sufficient to cover the additional time and digital applications needed by teachers with disabilities.
- Teachers with disabilities needed additional support to travel to in-person training.

The STELIR programme took an adaptive management approach to inclusion, responding to the needs of teachers with disabilities as they became apparent. Teachers with disabilities were given additional support for language testing, to attend training and to complete assignments. Aptis placement tests were provided in braille to enable teachers with visual impairment to join the course. From Stage 3, Year 1 onwards, all course materials were available in braille and large print. Data bundles were made unlimited. Although the eTMs were not initially aware that some participants had disabilities, once they became aware of this, they made positive efforts to ensure that these participants were included in discussions. Despite some accessibility issues, participants with disabilities expressed a preference for the on-line modality over the in-person training. The online element has now undergone a full Equality, Diversity and Inclusion review and future versions will be made more accessible.

The course delivery model has potential to be more disability responsive and accessible for teachers with disabilities. This will be greatly assisted by official data on teacher disability being collected and reported to inform the building of disability inclusion into the design.

Learning from STELIR: key success factors in delivering equitable teacher professional development at scale

1. To be effective and sustainable at scale, teacher professional programmes need to be coherent with national education policies and embedded within a supportive system. STELIR success was enabled through its close alignment to the ESSP and through its leveraging of the expertise of ETTs and SBMs, roles already established within schools and universities. In many schools, teachers were able to engage in STELIR courses in schools, during time allocated to professional development.

The British Council's long-standing relationship with REB and the Rwanda Ministry of Education has facilitated this.
2. The STELIR training model offered diverse training modalities and entry points, enabling STELIR to meet the training needs of different groups of teachers. The placement tests ensured that training was delivered at the right level. The different training modalities suited different learning styles, preferences and needs. For example, female teachers tended to prefer in-person training, whereas the teachers with disabilities reported preferring the on-line training.
3. The gender responsive design and targeted support for female participants enabled female teachers to overcome gendered barriers and to achieve high levels of course completion and learning outcomes.
4. The innovative use of social media enabled STELIR to provide on-going technical support through its eTMs and dedicated technical support team members in each district. WhatsApp groups, including all female ones, enabled participants to learn from each other and collectively troubleshoot challenges as they arose. These groups also provided a source of programme learning to inform adaptive management, responding to barriers to participation experienced by different groups of teachers.



Recommendations

Those involved in the design and delivery of teacher professional development programmes should:



1. Consult with female teachers and teachers with disabilities throughout the design and delivery process.

The design of training modalities, content, material and scheduling need to be gender and disability responsive and informed by the experience and lived realities of minority groups of teachers in that context. Programmes should support the establishment of virtual PLCs for female teachers and teachers with disabilities, and use feedback from these groups to problem-solve challenges to access and continued engagement as they arise. Allow for flexibility of training modality and timing of live sessions based on participants needs.



2. Ensure that gender and disability responsiveness is 'hardwired' into the design of course materials and delivery.

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Education systems should:



1. Review their commitments to inclusive and equitable quality education (SDG 4) to ensure this goes beyond a focus on learners to include teachers, teacher educators and education administrators.

Where sector strategic plans state support to inclusive education as a key intervention, governments should include teachers with disabilities and other special needs in education policies and official statistics. Monitoring and reporting on marginalised professional groups such as female teachers and teachers with disabilities – likewise teacher educators and administrative staff – will also provide essential data for programme designers to make TPD accessible to all participants needs.



2. Support the development of multi-disciplinary and multi-site teams for the delivery of teacher professional development.

Quality and inclusive TPD requires the development of a cadre of teacher educators based in teacher training institutes, districts and schools who can deliver in-person and online training and ongoing mentoring. Ministries of education and their development partners should use regional or international expertise strategically to work with national teacher educators in the delivery of on-line training. Teams should include members with expertise in digital literacy and online learning, capable of delivering training and on-going support.



3. Give teachers protected time and space at school to dedicate to their professional development.

It can be challenging for female teachers to study at home and to attend training at weekends. Education systems and schools can support inclusive TPD by allowing teachers to access professional development opportunities, including online training, in schools during the working day.



4. Ensure that all teachers, including female teachers and teachers with disabilities, can access on-line as well as in-person professional development.

Teachers need access to devices and data. They need opportunities and training to develop their digital skills. Some teachers with special needs will require additional support such as access to assistive devices and software. Teachers with disabilities and mothers of young children may need additional support to travel to in-person training venues.

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