

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

Teacher Professional Development (TPD) at scale often uses blended learning to reach large numbers of teachers for cost efficiency and sustainability. Ensuring equity and inclusion within @scale TPD can be more challenging: women teachers (WT) and teachers with disabilities (TWD) in rural contexts can be excluded by social norms and through insufficient focus on specific or individual needs. When TPD recognises and addresses such needs, the benefits for all teachers are great.

This policy paper presents research findings from a process evaluation (2024-2026) through a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion lens of an ambitious and complex large-scale Teacher Professional Development (TPD) programme that aimed to improve the English language proficiency of over 10,000 Lower Secondary School Teachers in mostly rural schools in post-conflict Rwanda. It proactively implemented adaptations to support WT and TWD to access and

engage the programme. This was not without challenges for these two groups of teachers, notably where the TPD moved into school based CPD, but where also potentially the greatest sustainable benefit was located.

This policy paper suggests possible changes to TPD with recommendations for actors at school, district, and national systems level to strengthen teacher education and move towards greater equity and inclusion within @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 number of WT in education is increasing as more women gain higher education. However, WT are only 35% of the secondary level teaching workforce (MINEDUC, 2025). Deeply embedded gender norms assign women dual burdens of caregiving and professional responsibilities which limit their capacity for time intensive TPD required for professional development and promotion (Mumporeze & Prieler, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2024). Most WT are under 35 with young families, and up to 40% in our sample live some distance from the schools they work in. With short maternity leave, WT must balance care of their babies with teaching when they return to work, especially in rural areas.

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

Rwanda brought in a competency-based, student-centred curriculum from 2016, delivered from 2020 with English as language of instruction from Primary One (MINEDUC 2024). This linguistic shift creates challenges for both teachers and students who speak mainly the national language (Kinyarwanda) in daily interactions. Women in rural locations are further disadvantaged as they have less exposure to English which remains a second or often third language for those who acquire it (Milligan et al. 2023; Westbrook et al. 2025).

Alignment of research with the new CPD framework

The research coincides with REB's publication of its new CPD framework in 2025. As such, it supports the framework's goal of strengthening teacher quality, motivation and professionalism, and speaks directly to its guiding principles of inclusive and equitable CPD in the mandated weekly slot for all schools. Recognising the Framework as a national directive, school leaders were open to the Participatory Action Research used in Phase 4 of our study and which aligns with the framework's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) model, promoting a culture of reflection and improvement.

Secondary Teachers English Language Improvement Rwanda - TPD programme at scale

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

STELIR's blended and multimodal approach to TPD at scale has three consecutive training components, differentiated according to levels of English proficiency (A0/A1, A2 and B1). Contents of the training were relevant to teachers' contexts and the pedagogies used were highly interactive. Each component had specific adaptations designed to support WT and TWD:

Table 1: Three consecutive components of STELIR

Component 1	Component 2	Component 3
Face to face interactive training – 1 or 2 weeks Residential in a Teacher Training College	Online self-study Units from REB Moodle site for 20 weeks & synchronous weekend meetings of 1.5 hours	School-based training in Wednesday afternoon CPD slots for 5 months
Adaptations: WT: creches, travel allowances for nannies, food and sleeping appropriate for babies. TWD: inclusive pedagogies; assistive technology, guides to support unfamiliar venues.	Adaptations: Tablets, headphones, internet bundles loaned for duration; WT: 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 gender responsive, disability responsive and inclusive training.		

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

This research takes the form of a longitudinal qualitative process evaluation from 2024-2026 following two of STELIR's training cycles. It looks at how WT and TWD access and engage the TPD programme, particularly the school-based component. As part of the larger [Empowering Teachers Initiative](#), the research considers issues around working at scale, the extent and nature of reach, efficiency in terms of financial and human costs, and how these interface with quality of learning and equity.

Research Questions

- 1: To what extent do **adaptations and localisations create the necessary conditions** for equitable access and participation in @scale TPD (STELIR) for all teachers, especially WTs and TWDs in rural areas of Rwanda?
- 2: **What wider impact** does improving equitable access to and participation in @scale TPD have on stakeholders and teaching quality?

SITPDR has five phases:

Phase 1 Inception - Orientation towards the research design and team building.

Phase 2 Contextualisation - System level interviews (n=24) were carried out including with representatives from the Rwanda Education Board (REB), District Education Officers (DEOs) and Sector Education Inspectors (SEIs). Case studies of 10 schools (total participants = 66) in three districts prioritised the voices of WT (n=29) and four TWD who worked in special schools. The team returned to these schools a year later to ascertain the long-term impact of STELIR.

Phase 3 Customisation - A series of interactive workshops with participants were held in iterative feedback and feedforward processes, and with key systems level stakeholders to discuss and work with interim findings. A Visual Guide was co-constructed from this process to support schools in strengthening CPD and ensure greater equity and inclusion.

Phase 4 Field testing – Using Participatory Action Research in nine schools in three further districts, researchers worked with school-based mentors (SBMs) and held focus groups with WT (n= 50) to identify and test out manageable and realistic changes in their schools over three months, referencing those prompts in the Visual Guide. One limitation was that, despite extensive sampling, we could not identify any more TWD in STELIR cycle two schools.

Phase 5 Consolidation – Drawing across the data sets, the data analysis phase culminated with a final workshop in January 2026 where key stakeholders across national, district and school levels agreed on recommendations for actions to improve equity and inclusion in CPD.

Research Findings

Impact of adaptations on participants' access and engagement

The practical adaptations STELIR put in place, such as creches, travel cover for nannies, training in digital literacy and loan of hardware, facilitated WT's attendance and secured their engagement, knowing their children were safe and nearby. These adaptations required high levels of support and nimble programmatic responsiveness for finetuning, such as the provision of more accessible venues, assistive technology and guides for TWD and unlimited internet for all participants. Localisations were also put in place: school-based mentors (SBMs) prioritised STELIR content for CPD; some schools provided time and space for WT to study together online at work; and TWD adapted the STELIR material to work with specific impairments.

Despite these adaptations and localisations, WT had to rearrange their domestic lives to make time for night and weekend study. Tablets and internet bundles provided could not overcome challenges of connectivity in rural areas (See Barayagwiza et al. 2026). WT had to cost share to participate, as did initially TWD in providing their own laptops and assistive devices. In response there was some resistance by participants, with absenteeism and lack of engagement in learning. Participants also resented the temporary access to educational technology, having to return their tablets at the end of the online course for redistribution to other STELIR cohorts.

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

Positive impact on levels of English and practice over time

There were immediate benefits for participants in the increase in levels and confidence of spoken English and more varied classroom practice. These benefits increased and expanded over the year following completion. There was also more knowledge sharing amongst staff and greater participation of WT in CPD:

Table 2: Expected and unintended benefits of STELIR

Intended benefits of STELIR a year later	Unexpected benefits a year later
Increased levels of English proficiency and confidence in using the language English used consistently in classrooms as language of instruction Wider use of English around the school & community	Strengthened subject knowledge from online research (using tablets & bundles provided) Greater use of digital technology for lesson planning & delivery Improved interactive classroom practices including greater group work & games Improvement in reported student outcomes

Strengthening of school-based mentor capacity and influence	Greater sense of community of practice & knowledge sharing amongst staff Greater leadership involvement in CPD & action plans (although this varied across schools & Districts) Evidence of women taking on more leadership roles within CPD & school
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Clearly, STELIR made a great impact on all teachers including those in rural areas, despite its scale and relative demands. Findings also indicate that acquiring a second or third language such as English takes quite a length of time for it to be fully learnt and used in the classroom.

The extent and nature of any knowledge-sharing amongst teachers

Initially in the case studies, teachers stated that heavy workloads, low motivation and reluctance of those with poor English to speak out prevented them from easily sharing the learning gained from STELIR with colleagues. A year later, teachers more readily shared subject knowledge, teaching methods or English usage, both in the staff room and at departmental meetings. With renewed motivation for regular CPD, WT took on facilitating roles in CPD and the sessions became more interactive. Through such 'knowledge-spillover', Communities of Practice developed over the year in schools. These benefitted all teachers, especially trainee teachers and those who missed CPD through sickness or caring responsibilities.

Challenges for equitable CPD at school level

However, there were major challenges for equitable learning at the point where the third component of STELIR 'landed' in schools, the weekly CPD slot. This reduced the potential impact STELIR could make on many more teachers and limited its sustainability in schools and classrooms. These challenges were repeatedly stated by respondents across Phases 2, 3 & 4:

Monitoring and evaluation

- Competing demands on school leaders' time limited their sustained involvement in CPD.
- SEIs and DEOs had little knowledge of STELIR, and limited time or resources to follow up on CPD activities in schools.
- SEIs had a larger role to play in organising CPD at sector level, utilising Sector SBM role.

Organisation of CPD

- Schools generally lacked a conducive space for CPD with internet connection which was large enough for all staff to attend, including primary and secondary school staff
- Plans for CPD can be disrupted by other school or community activities
- A lack of basic incentives like water, refreshments or notebooks kept some teachers away at the end of busy days
- Some CPD activities focused on social or local issues unrelated to teaching profession

Challenges faced by women teachers

- Some male colleagues and school leaders held negative attitudes about women such as women are 'naturally hesitant and timid' which limited expectations of WT and curtailed opportunities offered to them
- WT faced additional challenges in attending the fixed times for CPD due to domestic and caregiving responsibilities
- The short maternity leave (three months) 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, brought to them by their nannies, in a quiet corner of the school.

Challenges faced by teachers with disability

- Negative conceptions that TWD are physically unable to teach prevents equitable recruitment of TWD to mainstream schools
- TWD are channelled into teaching in Special Schools under the misapprehension that they are best placed to teach children with disabilities in more accessible schools.
- Training venues, and schools, are not always accessible, despite policies requiring straightforward reasonable adjustments

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

Researchers worked with school-based mentors (SBMs) in nine further schools across three more districts to select and test out actions to make CPD more inclusive, drawing on the Visual Guide for help. There were three key actions most commonly taken that created conditions within schools for further changes to be made through a multiplier effect:

Table 3: Key actions - Increased involvement by school leaders in CPD

1. Increased involvement by school leaders in CPD	Creates conditions for further changes	Specific examples of changes made in schools
	Collaborative planning	Director of Studies & Mentor jointly plan CPD
	Change of mindset 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
	Increased efficacy, agency & status of mentor, especially when their workload is reduced	Mentor gains confidence from STELIR training & collaborative role.

Table 4: Key actions - Increased involvement of women teachers in CPD

	Creates conditions for further changes	Specific examples of changes made in schools
2.Increased involvement of women teachers in continuous professional development	Equal access & participation in CPD	Schools prioritise women's participation in CPD Women teachers take up leadership roles in CPD
	Enhanced awareness within the school about issues that affect women teachers	Increased follow up on women teachers who miss CPD Flexibility for times to breastfeed & discharge caring responsibilities Consideration to put in place a women's room at school
	Increased confidence in the capabilities of women teachers	Views about women teachers' capability by male colleagues & leadership positively altered Women teachers become role models for others

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

	Creates conditions for further changes	Specific examples of changes made in schools
2. Increased use of English in CPD	Greater confidence in using English for women teachers	Greater use of English in teaching More use of English in social media, e.g. teachers' WhatsApp groups
	Primary & secondary teachers benefit from practising English together	Whole school learning – bringing primary & secondary teachers together
	Mutual support – more confident teachers support less proficient ones	Teachers more willing to practise English together & to learn from one another
	Increase in informal knowledge sharing	Informal departmental & staff room discussions conducted in spoken English

Importantly, these actions subtly shifted the discourse around the capabilities of WT within schools, even when they went against social norms. Notably, however, because we could not identify any TWD in our PAR sample, actions in schools did not extend to support them.

Phase 5 Final Workshop with key stakeholders to develop key recommendations

Stakeholders across all levels worked in groups to prioritise actions to be taken by schools, considering which had the highest impact and considering any possible costs involved

Key actions to be taken to increase equity and inclusion in CPD:

High impact but low cost

- The middle tier of sector and district need to have greater awareness of school based CPD, to monitor it and to advocate for more equitable and inclusive practices
- School leaders need to be more involved in CPD
- English should be used more consistently in CPD and teaching as an important means of improving learner outcomes

- Women teachers should speak out and present in CPD and take on leadership roles to maximise potential and build confidence

High impact with relatively higher costs

- A women's room should be provided in each school for WT with babies
- Teachers with disability should be automatically recruited to mainstream schools
- School leaders should support reasonable adjustments required for TWD

Recommendations for developing more equitable and inclusive CPD

National level

MINEDUC

To plan and budget for the provision of a women's room in schools;

To provide space and resources needed for CPD;

To pay for the costs for assistive technology for TWD and other reasonable adjustments;

To revise recruitment policies with target numbers to ensure equitable recruitment and deployment of TWD into mainstream schools.

Rwanda Education Board:

The CPD Framework offers an opportunity to enable and support teachers to move towards Communities of Practice, for example, with flexibility of times and length for CPD, which avoids an overly proscriptive approach;

The performance contract ('imihigo') for school leaders can relate to CPD planning and monitoring.

Rwanda Education Board Inclusion Unit:

To implement clear policies to support children with disabilities and TWD across the whole life cycle, from primary to secondary to university and teacher training and deployment to accessible mainstream as well as special schools;

To enhance their implementation and monitoring role around gender and disability in CPD.

Heads of School Organisation (HOSO):

To advocate for positive representations of gender and disability within their organisations and remove barriers to equity.

Disabled Peoples' Organisations:

To work with MINEDUC and REB to collect accurate and disaggregated data on prevalence of disability;

To advocate for TWD to be deployed to mainstream schools.

District and Sector level

A role change is required for this middle tier for greater engagement in schools' CPD and for English to be used as official language of communication at this level.

District level:

DEOs to forge a closer engagement with schools and take on a formal reporting role for CPD.

Sector level:

SEIs to take on an advocacy role through gender and disability training to recognise, mitigate and remove barriers and cultural stigmas for WT and TWD.

SEIs to work with headteachers on ways to support WT to safely speak up and take on leadership roles.

Recommendations for School level

Head teacher:

School leaders need to be trained in the new CPD framework;

CPD related activities should be included in school leaders' performance contracts;

Works with the middle tier and national level to advocate for a women's room and a conducive space and resources for CPD;

Plans CPD events with the DOS and SBM and avoids disruptions to planned CPD;

Attends CPD events, encourages all staff to participate and monitors CPD attendance;

Is a role model in giving WT and TWD leadership roles and time and space to speak out;

Supports TWD to be deployed to their school and supports any specific needs they require.

CPD Coordinator:

Plans CPD collaboratively with school leaders;

Encourages WT and TWD to present at CPD sessions and be highly engaged;

Shares notes from CPDs and uploads to social network platform to support teachers who miss CPD.

Recommendations for programmers of large scale TPD:

- TPD @scale may need both adaptations and nimble responsiveness to challenges that arise to optimise learning for WT and TWD. Relatively minor adaptations to planned adaptations can majorly affect access and quality and reduce cost sharing.
- Programmers can mitigate the high costs placed on WT by identifying alternatives to training sessions planned at weekends or holidays.
- TPD programme management are in a position of care for participants and should provide clear information on what they provide such as creches and loaned tablets, so that participants know what to expect from such provision.

- Programmers need to presume diversity and disability for any group of teachers taking part in TPD, and plan for this, using wide definitions of what constitutes disability. Use of the Washington Set of Short Questions can support accurate identification of needs and encourage disclosure.
- Programmers can engage with the middle tier at District and Sector level to ensure awareness and buy-in of external TPD; draw on their knowledge and expertise of schools for advocacy and monitoring of TPD that includes a school- based component.

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 the Canadian Government's International Development Research Council (IDRC) and FIT-ED.

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