

Rapid Response Brief  
August 2023

What can research evidence tell us about:

## Possible Policy Considerations for a teacher as an “agent” of socio-economic transformation

### Key messages

- Teachers are fundamental in shaping learners into who they are. Teachers, as agents of socio-economic transformation, are able to implement new practices of teaching and assessment, address curricular challenges and transfer ideas and perceptions to learners.
- However, certain qualities are essential for a teacher to be an agent of socio-economic transformation. These include:
  - Researcher: Teachers who invest time in research are able to learn new teaching methods and apply these to their learners, identify strengths and weaknesses of their learners and how to cater for learners’ needs.
  - Identity: how a teacher perceives their identity in their context
  - Professional knowledge: A teacher's ability to fulfil duties and improve learner outcomes.
  - Ethics and commitment to social justice: A sense of ethics, values and their perception of right or wrong.
  - Reflective practice: curiosity, questioning, self-study, and critical analysis skills
  - Collaborative: Developing relationships with and supporting learners in developing relationships with peers and learners in a learning community.
- Potential policy options to influence teacher agency for socio-economic transformation include:
  - Continuous Professional Development. Train teachers in continuous professional development programs that focus on critical areas such as research skills, self-reflection, communication, collaboration, technology use, and critical analysis.
  - Professional collaboration. There is need to establish clear policies for teacher leadership development, including preparation, recruitment, deployment, and support.
- It is essential to focus first on the transformation of teachers through the implementation of policies that are tailored to their needs and the specific context in which they operate.

### Where did this Rapid Response come from?

This document was created in response to a specific question from a policymaker in Uganda in 2023.

It was prepared by the Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis (ACRES) at the Uganda country node of the Regional East African Community Health (REACH) Policy Initiative.

### + Included:

- **Key findings** from research
- **Considerations about the relevance** of this research for health system decisions in Uganda

### ✗ Not included:

- Recommendations
- Detailed descriptions



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## Summary

**Background:** The education system is a driver of change for the accelerated socio-economic transformation – fundamental shift of Uganda’s economy from an agricultural-based economy to an industrialized economy, especially by producing useful citizens. The role of a teacher is central to the process of producing responsible citizens, therefore, it is crucial that interventions are directed towards improving the quality of teachers. Uganda’s Ministry of Education and Sports has undertaken several efforts to improve the quality of a teacher. However, there is still a glaring gap between the inputs to improve the quality of education, learners’ outcomes, and the impact on the communities and, by extension, the country. The Education Policy Review Commission (EPRC) is seeking input from different experts through public hearings to comprehensively review the gaps and needs for policies in the education system. This rapid response brief summarizes the evidence related to policy considerations for transforming a teacher into an agent of socio-economic transformation. The evidence will inform discussions by an invited expert to the EPRC.

**Rapid Response Question:** *What are the possible policy considerations for a teacher as an “agent” of socio-economic transformation?*

### Findings:

Evidence summarised here relates to a teachers’ professionalism and autonomy that facilitate their ability to act as an agent for socio-economic transformation. We go ahead to show how important teacher agency is to socio-economic transformation, qualities of a teacher that facilitate this agency, potential policy options to influence teacher agency and their implementation considerations.

#### ➤ *Importance of teacher agency for the socio-economic transformation*

Teacher agency enables teachers to address curricular changes and any challenges related to the curriculum. It enables teachers to implement new practices more easily to achieve the desired outcomes as it empowers them to communicate easily with leadership and colleagues. Teacher agency facilitates adaptability of teachers to new and creative approaches for formative assessment with a broad perspective of outcomes beyond literacy and numerical outcomes. They act strategically as individuals and enhance collective activities to facilitate improved learners’ experience in schools. The idea that schools are learning communities is activated when teachers have the agency which draws on individual and group activities for improved learners’ experience.

#### ➤ *Qualities of a teacher essential for agency in the socio-economic transformation*

The qualities of a teacher constitute what they think, know, and believe they can do in a teaching classroom. The qualities include a set of cognitive, belief, and behavioural characters that influence the teacher’s capacity to deploy and utilise the resources in their context. These include:

**Identity:** how a teacher perceives their identity in their context

**Professional knowledge:** The aggregated capacity of a teacher to perform expected assignments effectively with a sense of responsibility to contribute to the learners’ outcomes

**Ethics and commitment to social justice:** A sense of ethics, values and their perception of right or wrong

**Reflective practice:** curiosity, questioning, self-study, and critical analysis skills

**Collaborative:** development of relationships to guide and support students’ development during and beyond the school and working with peers and learners in a learning community

**Innovative:** possession of innovative skills and openness to new ideas

**Motivated:** Possession of a positive attitude towards the value of education and professional practice develop.

**Accountability:** A high sense of responsibility for citizenship and/or towards learners' outcomes

→ *Potential policy options to influence teacher agency in the current context*

We highlight areas where policy options could be considered to stimulate teacher agency. These include: Continuous Professional Development, Professional collaboration, Teacher reflexive practices and school autonomy.

**Continuous Professional Development:** Collaborative approaches to train teachers in degree and non-degree programs focussing on identified contextual critical areas including self-reflection, communication, collaboration, use of technology, and critical analysis skills, among others.

**Professional collaboration:** This focusses on empowering teacher leadership in schools. Leadership is often at the nexus between the school and the legal regulatory frameworks within which teachers are expected to operate. It is critical to have clear policies for preparation of teachers' leadership in addition to recruitment, deployment, and support.

**Teacher reflexive practices:** Training methods for developing or applying teacher agency should include inquiry into their own conceptions and prior experiences. Using appropriate collaborative methods facilitates inquiry and eventually teacher agency and professionalism.

→ *Implementation considerations of the factors affecting teacher agency for the socio-economic transformation*

These factors can be described in three broad categories: personal, social/relational and contextual factors.

**Personal:** These are intrinsic attributes that influence a teacher's ability for sense making and translating the reforms or policies to their work flow within the constraints of their school and social environments. These include: personal beliefs, values, background, identities, emotions; knowledge, skills, and experiences.

**Social/ relational at school level:** These include professionalism in relating with others. This translated into the ability to act collectively, making use of communication skills and develop collegial relationships and collaborative spaces within the school. In here, we as well we consider teachers' leadership which directly affects school autonomy, accountability and availability of resources which ultimately affects educational outcomes.

**Contextual at social level:** Awareness of social constraints and within the community is critical for the teacher to understand the relevant and pertinent public narratives and actions about teaching. The public narratives affect how agency and professionalism of the teacher. However, this is often cyclic as actions at one end influence actions at the other.

**Conclusion:** Teachers have significant role to play in the socio-economic transformation of an economy, where, they can potentially act as agents for the change. This can be done through the pertinent responsibility of creating a sufficient citizenry to drive socio-economic transformation. Teachers, however, also need to first be transformed through improvement of their quality by enactment of teacher sensitive contextual policies.

## Background

The Education Policy Review Commission was constituted to draft the new macro policy framework for the education and sports sector [1]. The Commission's policy framework will replace the 1992 Government White Paper, which has provided a blueprint for education policies spanning over three decades. These policies will be aligned with Uganda's Vision 2040, "*A transformed society from a peasant to a modern and prosperous country within 30 years.*"

As such, the policy framework shall situate the education sector as a driver of change for the accelerated socio-economic transformation. This means that the education system has a critical role to play in the fundamental shift of Uganda's economy from an agricultural-based economy to an industrialized economy [2], fitting into the global narrative, which draws parallels in the quality of the economy and the outputs of the education system, as human capital development. The education system's role in driving the socio-economic transformation is two-fold: as a contributor to the economy through employment and as a producer of useful citizens for the country. However, primarily, texts refer to the latter. It often necessitates asking about the quality of citizens or products that are pre-requisite to drive the desired change. Examples of the desired attributes or values nurtured by the education system include critical analysis skills, flexibility, citizenship, accountability, entrepreneurship, adaptability, resilience, God-fearing, and knowledge [3]. Additionally, the citizens should have a long-term vision mindset, an ability and willingness to life-long learning and coping within a dynamic environment and collaborate ethically and responsibly.

The education process offers an opportunity, which means that the ability to drive change should be cultivated during the time learners are experiencing school (formal or non-formal) or at home (informal). This view diverts from one where it is only about human capital development but where the teachers, learners, and schools are active agents of change in their communities. Specifically, the role of a teacher as central to the process and achievements is often a target for several interventions and policy changes [4]. A teacher as an agent for the socio-economic transformation would need careful deliberation about the teacher as a professional and an autonomous being. Professionally, a teacher is productive and has a set of abilities to perform the expected professional duties and a sense of responsibility to contribute to national development, focusing on improving a learner's outcomes or impact [5]. On the other hand, an autonomous teacher is willing and able to act on their environment to engender professional development activity and learner's autonomy [6]. There is a complex interplay between autonomy, professionalism, school autonomy and leadership. However, several policies, specifically towards the quality of education, communicate the vision frames for the education system but could also introduce constraints to the teachers' actions. The teachers' autonomy is often constrained through the prescriptions of the policies for professionalism, introducing conflicts between teacher's professionalism and autonomy.

The Ministry of Education and Sports has undertaken several efforts to improve the quality of a teacher; for example, strengthening recruitment, deployment, retention, personal development, and discipline and improving teacher training. Other strategies include support during the curriculum implementation, provision of instructional materials, and change of assessment methods. However,

### How this Rapid Response was prepared

After clarifying the question being asked, we searched for systematic reviews, local or national evidence from Uganda, and other relevant research. The methods used by the SURE Rapid Response Service to find, select and assess research evidence are described here:

[www.evipnet.org/sure/rr/methods](http://www.evipnet.org/sure/rr/methods)

there is still a glaring gap between the inputs to improve the quality of education, learners' outcomes, and the impact on the communities and, by extension, the country.

The Education Policy Review Commission (EPRC) is seeking input from different experts through public hearings to comprehensively review the gaps and needs for policies in the education system [1]. This rapid response brief summarizes the evidence related to policy considerations for transforming a teacher into an agent of socio-economic transformation. The evidence will inform discussions by an invited expert to the EPRC.

**Rapid Response Question:** What are the possible policy considerations for a teacher as an “agent” of socio-economic transformation?

## Summary of findings

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In this report we summarise findings related to a teacher's professionalism and autonomy that facilitate s/he ability to act as an agent for socio-economic transformation. This lens describes a teacher as an agent – who is able to adopt, adapt, modify, and at times resist new changes in the interest of positive learners' outcomes. The alternative is where the teacher is an actor/subject waiting for the policy tools or instructions to act and transmitter. The teacher has a meaningful role to reconfigure their professional and individual context to influence the desired learners' outcomes. The brief is structured in four parts, as shown below:

- i. Importance of teacher agency for the socio-economic transformation.
- ii. Qualities of a teacher essential for agency in the socio-economic transformation
- iii. Potential policy options to influence teacher agency in the current context
- iv. Implementation considerations of the factors affecting teacher agency for the socio-economic transformation.

### Importance of teacher agency for the socio-economic transformation

The following outcomes have been reported when teachers realise their agency through the prevailing constraints [3, 5-7]:

The teachers possess the capabilities and knowledge to implement a student-centred learning approach where the teacher is a facilitator of education and not a just a transmitter. This could include using teaching methods and instructional materials that are relevant to the students. The trend towards student centred learning is hindered by the lack of teacher agency. Studies have shown that facilitating teacher agency can influence the successful implementation of students centred learning even for complex subjects such as language and mathematics. The teachers are able to adapt the creative pedagogies- such as problem based, project based, or competency-based learning much more easily.

Teacher agency enabled teachers to address curricular changes and any challenges related to the curriculum. Studies have shown how teachers have adapted curricular in design strategies centred to incorporate context-specific and complex areas, such as environmental protection or climate change or family planning. Teachers are able to develop materials that the learners could relate with in their communities and homes.

They are able to implement new practices more easily to achieve the desired outcomes. Teachers with agency are empowered to communicate easily with leadership and colleagues to facilitate new practices. They are able to adapt and conduct formative assessments with a broad perspective of outcomes beyond the literacy and numerical outcomes. One of the challenges of designing education systems for socio-economic transformation is the linear and inadequate summative assessments of the learners. This culture permeates throughout society where schools are rated in media and by parents according to the performance scores of the learners. Teacher agency has been demonstrated to facilitate action of teachers to adapt new and creative approaches for continuous assessment. Where teachers were initially resistant to new assessment methods, they easily find creative approaches to ensure external and internal consistency of assessment of learners.

They act strategically as individuals and enhance collective activities to facilitate improved learners' experience in schools. The idea that schools are learning communities is activated when teachers have the agency which draws on individual and group activities for improved learners' experience. In this way, schools can be evaluated for the retention and survivability of students. Teachers work collaboratively with leaders, other teachers, parents, and learners when they have agency as it equips them with facilitative skills.

#### Qualities essential for agency in the socio-economic transformation

The qualities of a teacher constitute what they think, know, and believe they can do in a teaching classroom. This includes a set of cognitive, belief, and behavioural characters that influence the teacher's capacity to deploy and utilise the resources in his/her context. These are described below. Identity refers to how a teacher perceives his/her identity in their context, e.g., gender, tribe, or power which can influence how the teacher can actively exercise their agency in decision-making. This view describes the teacher within a context and they will act according to the perception of the constraints of their situation in the context.

Professional knowledge refers to the aggregated capacity of a teacher to perform expected assignments effectively and efficiently coupled with a sense of responsibility to contribute to the learners' outcomes and national development. Teachers develop meanings of the policies, which is influenced by the professional knowledge of the subject and altruism towards the ultimate goals. Professional knowledge gives the teachers a sense of confidence and direction. The professional knowledge is influenced by a combination of training, teacher research practice and experience. Teachers develop a strong sense of lifelong learning when they achieve agency in their work. Consequently, the teachers develop confidence in their own abilities as professional teachers. They make a difference in students' development, which influences their conduct to professionalism and even influence their roles in the learners lives as mentors [8].

Ethical and committed to social justice, refers to teachers who have a strong sense of ethics, values, right or wrong are often committed to social justice. This enables the teachers to achieve agency, encourage, and support different approaches towards learning. These teachers are often promoters and transformers of specific perspectives and approaches towards learners according to evidence, will have significant influence on the attitudes of their pupils' and an understanding of 'how to promote informed, active global 'citizenship [8, 9].

**Reflective practice.** Teachers with a strong reflective practice have curiosity, questioning, self-study, and critical analysis skills that are essential for developing agency. These teachers facilitate the learners to develop their own reflective practice and not just take responses without a critical look [5, 8]. This has been demonstrated among students with teachers who before getting grounded on a specific concept, the teacher establishes the need for that specific concept and not allowing students following them blindly.

**Collaborative:** teachers who develop relationships to guide and support students' development during and beyond the school achieve agency to collaborate with peers and learners in a learning community. This facilitates building mutual trust, dialogue, negotiation and collective decision-making which are essential elements for a transformative education for the learners [8, 10]. Additionally, the teachers with agency are approachable by students, parents, and colleagues and should be relaxed in their professional practice [8]. Accessibility and available provides platforms of interactions with teachers and students to foster the naturing of the students into empowered citizens with the knowledge of how do contribute to their social economic development. Teachers develop empathy and strong social and emotional attachments to the future of the learners. Teachers with agency often take initiatives to work together with colleagues demonstrate collaboration for enhancing their teaching at the classroom level [8, 9].

**Motivated:** Teachers with a positive attitude towards the value of education and their professional practice develop agency to facilitate a positive experience for learners to be agents of change. The teachers often have high moral goals and high expectations, and are intrinsically motivated to provide students with the highest quality of education possible [8]. As such, these teachers are often committed to the learning community and demonstrate a passion for shaping the learners experience as they walk through the journey of education [8].

**Innovative:** Teachers with innovative skills and are open to new ideas easily develop agency and influence a positive experience for their learners. However, this does not necessarily mean they blindly embrace all changes, but will critically analyse the develop to identify contextual applications while minimising the possible negative experiences from the innovation [8].

**Accountability:** Teachers with a high sense of responsibility for citizenship and/or towards learners' outcomes develop agency within schools. These teachers take the initiative and continually wish to change or influence education at both levels, together with colleagues, to enhance their students' learning and well-being [8, 10].

## Potential policy options to influence teacher agency in the current context

The section describes potential areas for interventions that could develop teacher agency [4, 5, 7, 11, 12].

We highlight areas where policy options could be considered to stimulate teacher agency and (re)professionalism. It is noticeable to point out that literature describing these interventions is limited to specific contexts and without an inclusion of different contexts, including settings in Uganda. However, the specific interventions are relevant to improving the quality of education and are often designed with that purpose.

### ➤ **Continuous Professional Development (CPD)**

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) activities are often designed or promoted as a prerequisite for (re)professionalisation of teachers. It is a core element of teacher management and development strategies. However, if done cursory it could lead to waste in resources without any identifiable impact on either the teacher, learner or even the school. Several authors have highlighted that importance of training of teachers in critical areas- including self-reflection, communication, collaborative, technological, and critical analysis skills as a critical driver of change. The training approaches for the CPD should be collaborative, e.g., degree or non-degree (workshop or group assignments). Collaborative approaches engender transformative education and agency among teachers, making it possible for teachers to work through contradictions and conflicts of promoting learners' autonomy even when they might be resistant to it initially [12]. However, it is important to consider matching contextual incentives for the teachers to motivate them and cultivate ownership for assignments as some might be discouraged because of examples where colleagues are not recognised for their additional qualifications.

Embedding teacher research practices within CPDs and workflow of teachers is one of the interventions with a high potential to transform teachers to achieve agency. However, most surveys have shown that teachers often lack the knowledge, skills, and have negative attitude towards research because of the perceived increased work load. Research is often perceived external to their organisation and often for academics or when involves teachers doing or learning how to read research. However, teachers have always shown to value research in their workflow. Interventions seeking to encourage a teacher research practice could range from building skills in reading research to working collaboratively with researchers to design and interpret research to inform their practice. Additionally, this has to be balanced with providing the teachers space for discretionary judgement as it stimulates their agency to action.

A critical skill of a 21st century competent teacher is to be able to adopt, adapt and modify technological skills for learning. Additionally, the emergence of social and health emergencies that interrupt learning in Uganda necessitates that these skills are taught and practiced to only ensure continuous learning during eventualities but also as tools for transformative education and education for sustainable development. In this respect, it is critical to facilitate access to cheap and affordable technologies, design on relevant technological applications, and supporting the teacher leadership to optimise the technological capabilities within the school environment.

### ➤ **Professional collaboration**

Empowering teacher leadership in schools. Research shows that teacher leadership is one of the most important elements for facilitating teacher agency and professionalism. An empowered leader with an identity for a transformed teacher with agency and professionalism is more likely to support new and more experienced teachers to achieve agency, develop collective actions and decision-making, mobilize resources for transformative education, develop collaborative links for the teachers and the schools with other institutions (within and out of the country), promote inter-dependence, and clear communication channels. The leadership is often at the nexus between the school and the legal regulatory frameworks within which they are expected to operate. Reviews show that it is critical to have clear policies for preparation of teacher's leadership in addition to recruitment, deployment,



and support. Current headteachers' platforms could be leveraged for leadership preparation and support to engender collaborations.

➤ **Balancing of school autonomy and mandates**

School autonomy is critical for stimulating teacher agency. However, schools operate within the constraints of local and national regulations. Schools that have had more autonomy, e.g., in the design of instructional materials, assessment methods were shown to have higher teacher agency and learner autonomy. It is important that the leadership finds a balance that facilitates transformative education within the schools. This could then support the creation collaborative spaces; e.g., co-design spaces for curricular co-designing of instructional materials, accountability or social justice.

➤ **Teachers' reflexive practices**

Training methods for developing or applying teacher agency should include inquiry into their own conceptions and prior experiences. Using appropriate collaborative methods facilitates inquiry and eventually teacher agency and professionalism.

Implementation considerations affecting teacher agency or professionalism for the socio-economic transformation.

This section describes the facilitators and barriers affecting teacher agency or professionalism for socio-economic transformation [5-7].

➤ **Personal**

This refers to intrinsic attributes that influence a teacher's ability for sense making and translating the reforms or policies to their workflow within the constraints of their school and social environments. Personal beliefs, values, background, identities, emotions; knowledge, skills, and experiences affect a teacher's agency or professionalism. Facilitating the teachers to still use their discretionary judgement in teaching.

Teacher research practice should be based on research. However, although teachers value research in their practice majority do not use it even after trainings, because of perceived increased workload, lack of knowledge as research is introduced at post-graduate level, lack of access, and failure of research to remain relevant to the teachers. Several transformative education trainings are often implemented within the context of researcher-teacher- leadership collaborations.

Mature professionalism. Supported by CPD based on learning- takes courage and requires a recognition of the complexity of school education and then a desire for improvement and action- it is highly political.

➤ **Social/ relational at school level**

Professional in relation with others, in context- translated in the ability to act collectively, making use of communication skills and develop collegial relationships and collaborative spaces within the school. Teachers' leadership affects the extent of school autonomy, evaluation, and accountability, which are strongly related to a close scrutiny educational outcome. The leadership provides guidance for continuous assessment methods or reducing the technicalities of summative assessments. Leadership also affects the availability of resources, including time for transformative education.

The positive effects that school autonomy has on school governance and management, teachers' work, school-based curriculums; student learning; continuous professional development requires a positive collaborative school environment.

➤ **Contextual at social level**

Awareness of social constraints and within the community is critical for the teacher to understand the relevant and pertinent public narratives and actions about teaching. The public narratives affect how agency and professionalism of the teacher. However, this is often cyclic as actions at one end influence actions at the other. A conscious form of social movement where there is trust, respect and reciprocity to improve the working conditions to improve the working conditions and status of teachers.

## Conclusion

Teachers have significant role to play in the socio-economic transformation of an economy, where, they can potentially act as agents for the change. This can be done through the pertinent responsibility of creating a sufficient citizenry to drive socio-economic transformation. Teachers, however, also need to first be transformed through improvement of their quality by enactment of teacher sensitive contextual policies.

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## What is a Rapid Response?

Rapid Responses address the needs of policymakers and managers for research evidence that has been appraised and contextualised in a matter of hours or days, if it is going to be of value to them. The Responses address questions about arrangements for organising, financing and governing health systems, and strategies for implementing changes.

## What is ACRES?

**ACRES** – The Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis (ACRES) is a center of excellence at Makerere University- in delivering timely evidence, building capacity and improving the understanding the effective, efficient and sustainable use of the rapid evidence syntheses for policy making in Africa. ACRES builds on and supports the Evidence-Informed Policy Network (**EVIPNet**) in Africa and the Regional East African Community Health (**REACH**) Policy Initiative (see back page). ACRES is funded by the Hewlett and Flora foundation. <http://bit.do/eNQG6>

## ACRES' collaborators:



Regional East African Community Health Policy Initiative

## Regional East African Community Health Policy Initiative



EVIPnet

## Glossary

of terms used in this report:

[www.evipnet.org/sure/rr/glossary](http://www.evipnet.org/sure/rr/glossary)

### **Conflicts of interest**

None known.

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