

Teacher Professional Development for Gender- Responsive Pedagogy in Sub-Saharan Africa

A Conceptual Framework

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About VVOB and the Regional Teachers Initiative for Africa



VVOB – *education for development* is an international non-profit organisation with over 40 years' experience in strengthening the quality of education systems in Africa, Asia and South America in close partnership with ministries of education and their institutions.

The Regional Teachers Initiative for Africa (RTIA) supports African countries to improve the education and training of teachers to make sure that their schools have qualified teachers. VVOB contributes to the RTIA project through the implementation of a regional project for scaling Teacher Professional Development (TPD) for Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) for early childhood, primary and lower secondary education.

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Foreword



As countries in Sub-Saharan Africa work towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education and the aspirations of Agenda 2063 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA), there is growing recognition that transforming education requires attention not only to what learners learn, but also to how teaching and learning take place in classrooms every day.

Teachers are central to this transformation. Through their daily interactions and teaching practices, teachers influence learners' participation, confidence, aspirations, and learning experiences. However, what happens in classrooms is also shaped by wider gender norms, school cultures, community expectations, and education systems that influence opportunities for learners. Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) therefore offers an important pathway for transforming teaching and learning by enabling educators to create inclusive, equitable, and empowering learning environments for all learners.

This Conceptual Framework for Teacher Professional Development for Gender-Responsive Pedagogy provides a shared understanding of the competencies, practices, and enabling conditions needed to strengthen and scale TPD for GRP across Sub-Saharan Africa. The framework is therefore intended not as a prescriptive model, but as common reference point that can support contextual adaptation, collective learning, and systems strengthening.

We hope that this framework will serve as a practical reference for policymakers, teacher educators, professional development entities, researchers, and development partners working to strengthen teacher professional development and advance gender equality in education. More importantly, we hope it contributes to ongoing efforts to create education systems that enable every learner to participate fully, realise their potential, and pursue their aspirations free from limiting stereotypes and inequalities.

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Executive Summary

Education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa are increasingly recognised as critical spaces for advancing gender equality, inclusion, and social transformation. However, gender inequalities continue to shape learners' participation, confidence, aspirations, and educational outcomes through everyday classroom interactions, institutional cultures, and broader social norms. Teachers therefore play a central role in transforming education systems by creating inclusive and equitable learning environments that challenge harmful stereotypes and support all learners to thrive.

This Conceptual Framework for Teacher Professional Development (TPD) for Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) provides a harmonised understanding of the competencies, practices, TPD principles, and enabling conditions required to strengthen gender-responsive teaching and learning across Sub-Saharan Africa. It is intended to serve as a practical and strategic resource for policymakers, teacher educators, programme and curriculum designers, researchers, and implementing partners seeking to strengthen and scale TPD for GRP across the region.

Grounded in findings from a regional evidence review on TPD for GRP, the framework recognises that teaching and learning are shaped by interconnected systems operating at classroom, school, community, and policy levels. The framework identifies four learner competencies, referred to as gender life skills:

- **Caring** – socio-emotional competency
- **Understanding** – analysing gendered realities
- **Engaging** – acting for gender justice
- **Aspiring** – envisioning gender-equal futures

These competencies are nurtured through gender-responsive teacher practices such as creating safe and inclusive learning environments, facilitating equitable classroom interactions, using gender-responsive learning materials and activities, adopting inclusive assessment approaches, and providing study and career guidance.

To implement these practices effectively, teachers require core competencies including:

- **Gender awareness** – critical understanding and application of gender concepts
- **Critical self-reflection** – interrogating personal beliefs, values, and attitudes on gender and how they affect teacher practices
- **Inclusive facilitation and classroom organisation**
- **Use of curriculum and teaching and learning materials in a gender-responsive manner**
- **Guidance orientation** – supporting learners to identify their strengths, interests, and future aspirations free from gender limitations

Importantly, the framework recognises that while these core teacher competencies remain consistent across education levels, their application differs across early childhood, primary, and secondary education according to learners' developmental needs and contexts.

The framework further recognises that effective implementation of GRP depends not only on teachers, but also on the enabling conditions that surround them.

At the **school level**, implementation is strengthened through a shared vision and culture for gender equality, safe and inclusive learning environments, teacher support and professional learning opportunities, and meaningful community engagement and partnerships.

At the **community level**, families, caregivers, local leaders, and community organisations influence gender norms, learner participation, and aspirations. Positive engagement can reinforce inclusive messages, provide role models, and expand opportunities for learners.

At the **policy level**, sustainable implementation requires policy alignment, coherent teacher professional development systems, institutional support and accountability mechanisms that embed GRP within education systems.

The framework also proposes key principles to guide the design and implementation of effective teacher professional development across the professional learning continuum, including pre-service teacher education and continuing professional development.

These principles include: (i) teacher agency and transformation; (ii) structured and progressive professional learning; (iii) practice-based and classroom-embedded learning; (iv) collaborative professional learning for GRP; and (v) ethical and inclusive foundations for GRP.

Together, these elements provide a coherent foundation for strengthening teacher practice and creating more inclusive, equitable, and gender-responsive learning environments for all learners across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Acronyms and Definitions

AU	African Union
AU CIEFFA	African Union International Centre for Girls' and Women's Education in Africa
CBC	Competency-Based Curriculum
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
ECE	Early Childhood Education
FAWE	Forum for African Women Educationalists
GRP	Gender-Responsive Pedagogy
PLC	Professional Learning Community
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TLMs	Teaching and Learning Materials
TPD	Teacher Professional Development
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNESCO IICBA	UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa

Key Definitions

Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP): A teaching and learning approach that identifies and addresses gender biases, stereotypes, and inequalities within the classroom and broader learning environment in order to ensure equitable participation, learning, and opportunities for all learners.

Teacher Professional Development (TPD): Structured and continuous processes that support teachers and school leaders to strengthen professional knowledge, competencies, practices and reflective capacities throughout their careers.

Gender Life Skills: Competencies that enable learners to critically understand gender norms and inequalities, build respectful relationships, participate meaningfully in society and aspire towards equitable futures.

Whole-School Approach: An approach that integrates gender equality and inclusion across teaching practices, school culture, leadership, policies, learner support systems and community engagement.

Gender Equality: The equal rights, responsibilities, opportunities, and treatment of all genders in education and society.

Inclusive Learning Environment: A learning environment that is safe, participatory, respectful, and responsive to the diverse identities, experiences and learning needs of all learners.

Introduction



Education in Africa is widely recognised as a cornerstone for social transformation which enables societies re-examine and reshape power relations, social norms, and structural inequalities ([African Development Bank, 2014](#), [UNESCO, 2025](#)). However, schools and classrooms are not neutral spaces; as inequalities in society are reproduced and reflected through everyday pedagogical practices, assessment routines and institutional cultures. These in turn shape learners' participation, confidence and opportunities ([FAWE, 2018](#)).

Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) offers a critical approach to transforming classrooms by equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills and mindsets needed to foster inclusive learning environments, challenge stereotypes and address the diverse learning needs of all learners. Evidence reveals that effective GRP implementation requires systematic teacher professional development that targets teachers' attitudes and gender biases in a holistic manner, equips educators with practical classroom strategies and promotes inclusive learning environments ([VVOB et al., 2025](#)).

The Conceptual Framework for TPD for GRP

The conceptual framework is grounded in findings from the literature review on Teacher Professional Development (TPD) for Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) in Sub-Saharan Africa (VVOB et al, 2025). It is anchored in the recognition that teaching and learning are not isolated processes but are embedded within a broader education ecosystem. Teachers operate within interconnected levels, ranging from the classroom and school to the community and the wider policy and institutional environment, which collectively shape their practices and learners' experiences.

It is intended to serve as a practical and strategic resource for policymakers, teacher educators, programme designers, researchers, and implementing partners seeking to strengthen and scale TPD for GRP across Sub-Saharan Africa. It provides a foundation for contextual adaptation while supporting greater coherence and shared understanding of gender-responsive teaching practice and professional competency development across education systems.

Drawing on established theories of teaching and learning, as well as gender theory (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991) the framework articulates the dynamic relationships between TPD, teacher competencies, and classroom practices, and how these in turn enable the development of learner competencies. It also recognises the critical role of enabling conditions across the system in influencing both teacher practice and learning outcomes.

To conceptualise these relationships, the framework adapts Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasises that individual behaviour is shaped by multiple, interacting layers of influence. Applied to GRP, this perspective highlights that teachers' beliefs, interactions, and pedagogical choices, and consequently learners' participation, agency, and outcomes, are shaped not only by classroom dynamics but also by school culture, community norms, and policy frameworks.

Within this framing, TPD for GRP is understood as a relational, multi-level process rather than a discrete intervention. It seeks to progressively strengthen teachers' competencies to design and implement gender-responsive teaching and learning practices. These practices, in turn, foster learner competencies that support equitable participation, challenge harmful gender norms and contribute to improved learning outcomes and broader social transformation.

Building on VVOB's implementation experience, particularly in early childhood education (VVOB, 2023), and aligned with the organisation's TPD principles and emerging Green and Gender conceptual framework, this model is structured around a set of interrelated system levels. These levels reflect the continuum from classroom practice to system-wide enablers, and together provide a coherent architecture for designing, implementing and scaling TPD for GRP.

The ecological framework for TPD for GRP is guided by the following questions:



Classroom level



- 1.1 What gender-related learner competencies should learners develop, considering age and context?
- 1.2 Which gender-responsive teaching and learning practices (solutions) are needed to support the development of these competencies?
- 1.3 What teacher competencies are required to apply these gender-responsive practices effectively?

School level



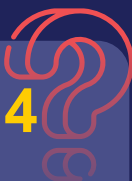
How can school leaders in establish a whole-school approach to support effective implementation of gender-responsive pedagogy?

Community level



What community factors enable / inhibit implementation of gender-responsive pedagogy?

Policy/system level:

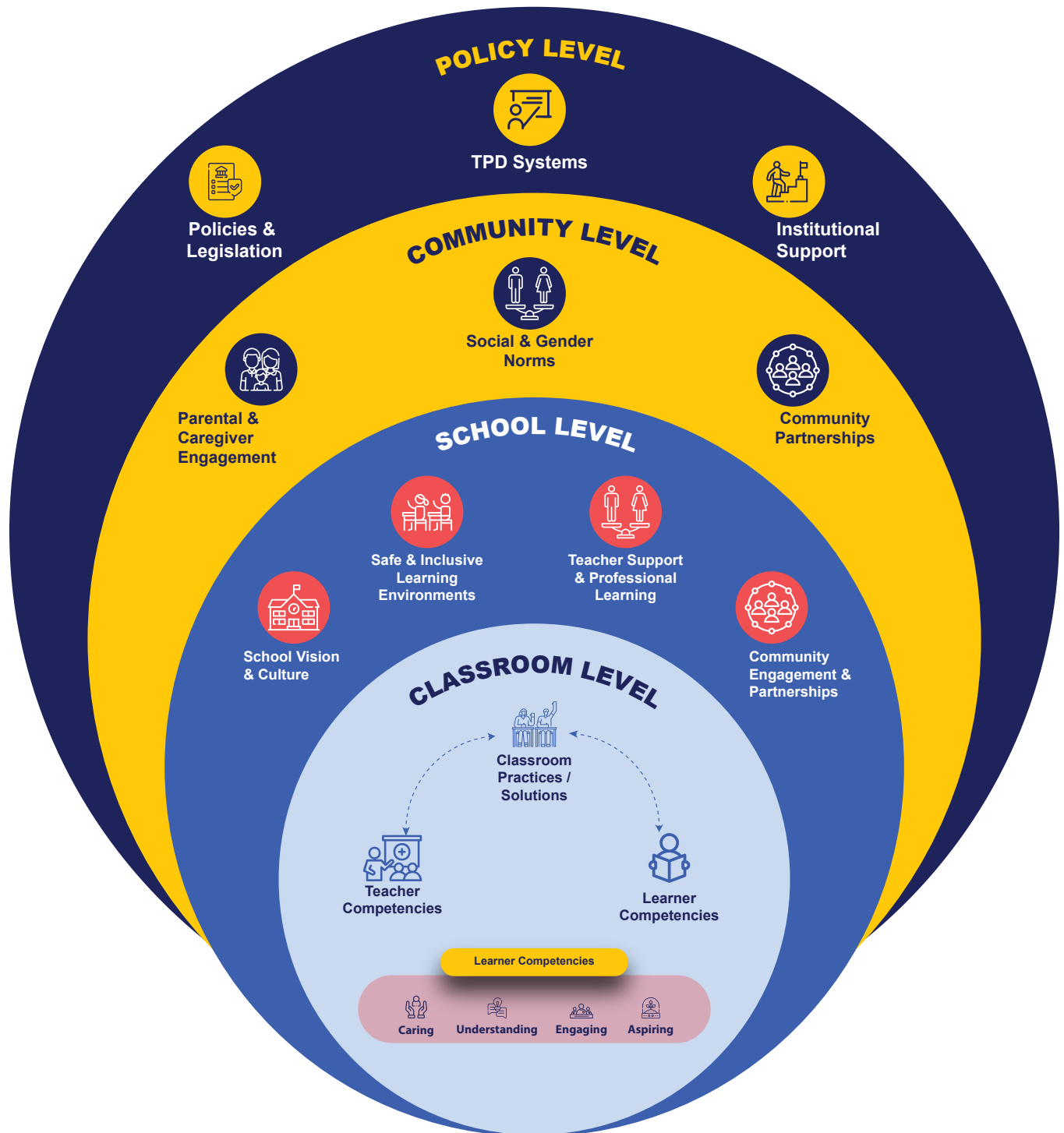


What structures or mechanisms are essential for scaling and institutionalisation of TPD for GRP?

What are the core principles guiding teacher professional development for GRP?



Figure 1: Visual representation of the inter-relationships between the different levels of the ecosystem.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR TPD FOR GRP

- Agency & Transformation**
- Structured & Progressive Professional Learning**
- Practice based & Classroom Embedded Learning**
- Collaborative Professional Learning for GRP**
- Ethical & Inclusive Foundations for GRP**

Teacher Competencies

- Gender Awareness
- Critical Reflection
- Inclusive Facilitation and Classroom Organisation
- Gender-Responsive Use of Curriculum and Teaching and Learning Materials
- Guidance Orientation

Classroom Solutions

- Safe & Inclusive Learning Environment
- Learning Materials
- Classroom Interactions
- Learning Activities
- Assessment
- Study & Career Guidance

1. Classroom Level



The classroom is the site where gender-responsive pedagogy is enacted to support the development of learners' competencies for gender-responsive life skills for the twenty-first century (UNESCO, 2025). These competencies are shaped through the interplay of teacher competencies and practices, including making instructional choices, creating classroom

conditions, and facilitating meaningful interactions that influence participation and learning.

This section will look further into the specific learner competencies, classroom practices and solutions and specific teacher competencies that enable gender-responsive pedagogy.

1.1. Learner competencies



The aim of GRP is the development of gender life skills competencies that allow learners to navigate gendered expectations, assert agency and participate fully and meaningfully in society. These skills include:

i. Caring (socio-emotional competency)

The ability to demonstrate empathy, respect, and inclusion in their relationships and interactions with others. It involves valuing the dignity of all individuals and contributing to positive, safe, and supportive learning environments.

ii. Understanding (analysing gendered realities)

The ability to recognise and question gender stereotypes, biases, and social

expectations. It involves understanding how these influence opportunities, participation and decision-making.

iii. Engaging (acting for gender justice)

The ability to actively participate and collaborate with others to promote fairness, inclusion, positive social change within their learning environments and communities.

iv. Aspiring (envisioning gender-equal futures)

The ability to recognise strengths, explore future opportunities, and pursue aspirations without gender limitations.

The above competencies develop progressively across education levels. In early childhood education, learners begin by practicing fairness and inclusion. In primary education, they increasingly recognise and question stereotypes and inequities. By secondary education,

learners are better equipped to exercise agency, challenge restrictive gender norms, and shape more gender-equitable futures. The table below illustrates this progression across different stages of education.

Table 1: Gender life skills according to age level/subsector in education

	Early Childhood Education	Primary Education	Secondary Education
 Caring (Socio-emotional competency)	Showing empathy, kindness, and respect to all children regardless of gender, abilities or background	Recognising and responding when others are treated unfairly because of gender or other differences	Acting to promote respect, inclusion and equity in relationships, peer groups and communities
 Understanding (critical awareness of gender)	Recognising similarities and differences among people and understanding that everyone should be treated fairly	Identifying and questioning gender stereotypes and expectations in school and at home	Analysing how gender norms, power relations and inequalities influence opportunities, participation and life choices
 Engaging (participation, collaboration and leadership)	Participating in play, routines and activities with all peers and sharing roles fairly	Collaborating confidently with diverse peers and encouraging equal participation	Exercising voice, agency and leadership e.g by participating in gender equity clubs, campaigns, or dialogues
 Aspiring (envisioning gender-equal futures)	Imagining diverse possibilities for themselves and others regardless of gender	Exploring interests and aspirations without being constrained by gender stereotypes	Making informed life, study and career choices without gender-based limitations

1.2. Gender-responsive classroom practices/solutions for developing gender life skills

Learners' development of gender life skills is enabled through everyday teaching and learning practices in the classroom and beyond. Each of these areas can either reinforce or challenge gender norms.

The tables below show practical examples of what teachers can do to reinforce the learner gender life skills/competencies.

Table 2: Examples of gender-responsive classroom practices/solutions

Solutions/ Practices	Caring 	Understanding 	Engaging 	Aspiring 
Safe and inclusive learning environment	Create emotionally safe and inclusive spaces that encourage kindness, empathy, sharing, and participation by all learners	Display visuals, provide examples and messages that challenge stereotypes and promote fairness and equal opportunities for all learners	Establish classroom norms that promote participation, collaboration, and shared responsibility	Create future-oriented learning spaces through career corners, role model displays, and exposure to diverse life pathways not limited by prevailing gender stereotypes
Learning activities	Plan learning activities based on learners' diverse interests	Design activities that help learners identify and question stereotypes, bias, and unequal expectations in everyday life Explore real-life examples of stereotypes in the community	Design activities where learners solve real-life gender-related issues (e.g. gender norms and roles, equity, and fairness) through debates, role plays, case studies	Explore diverse examples of people pursuing a wide range of educational and career pathways, including those that challenge traditional gender stereotypes.
Learning materials	Explore materials that help learners understand the experiences and challenges of others, fostering empathy, respect, and equitable treatment regardless of gender	Use learning materials critically to help learners identify, question, and discuss stereotypes, bias, and unequal expectations.	Provide resources highlighting examples of leaders, changemakers, and collective movements that have challenged inequality to encourage collaboration, leadership, and civic engagement	Use materials featuring diverse, non-traditional career paths that are not restricted by gender-roles and expectations to broaden learners' aspirations
Assessment	Recognise and value empathy, kindness, teamwork, cooperation participation	Assess learners' ability to reflect on fairness, stereotypes, and inclusion	Assess collaboration, teamwork, leadership, and contribution to group work	Use reflective activities that help learners identify strengths, set goals, monitor progress, and consider future pathways.
Classroom Interactions (Teacher-learner interactions, peer-peer interactions)	Model respectful language, empathy and equal attention Intervene constructively when learners express gender bias in their language	Use questions and dialogue to challenge stereotypes and encourage critical thinking	Ensure all learners have opportunities to participate, lead, collaborate, and express opinions.	Encourage all learners to express their interests ambitions confidently and affirm diverse aspirations and pathways without gender restriction
Study and career guidance	Encourage learners to express interests, strengths, ambitions, and aspirations freely	Support learners to recognise and question gendered barriers to study and career opportunities and to explore broad career pathways	Provide mentorship, peer support, leadership opportunities, and exposure to community engagement initiatives	Connect learners to mentors, role models, workplaces, career exposure opportunities, and diverse future pathways Facilitate dialogue with parents and caregivers to support learners aspirations, interests, and career possibilities regardless of gender.

1.3. Teacher competencies for gender-responsive pedagogy



Putting gender-responsive teaching into practice requires teachers to develop competencies that go beyond awareness of gender issues. Teachers need to be able to recognise and challenge bias, create inclusive learning environments, and ensure that all learners can participate meaningfully in the learning process.

In this sense, teacher competencies enable gender-responsive pedagogical practices, leading to equitable and inclusive learner outcomes. Based on the evidence review, the following core competencies are identified:

i. Gender Awareness

This competency refers to the ability of teachers to understand gender concepts such as gender norms, stereotypes, power relations, and how these shape learners'

experiences, participation, confidence, and achievement within the classroom and beyond.

ii. Critical Reflection on Gender Stereotypes and Expectations

This is the teachers' ability to continuously examine personal values, beliefs, biases, and assumptions about gender and their impact on teaching practices.

iii. Inclusive Facilitation and Classroom Organisation

The ability to create safe, participatory, and inclusive learning environments that support equitable participation, positive relationships and interactions, and meaningful engagement of all learners.

iv. Use curriculum and Teaching & Learning Materials (TLMs) in a gender-responsive manner

This refers to the ability of teachers to critically select, adapt, develop and use curriculum content and teaching and learning materials in ways that do not reinforce harmful stereotypes or exclusion. It also involves engaging learners to identify and challenge stereotypes and biases in learning materials.

v. Guidance Orientation

This competency refers to the teacher's ability to support learners to identify and explore interests, strengths, aspirations and future pathways free from restrictive gender norms.

In conclusion the interplay between learner competencies, pedagogical practices and solutions and teacher competencies is cyclical: as learner competencies develop, their interactions with teaching practices and experiences generate insights that inform teacher reflection and continuous refinement of practice. As will be elaborated in later sections of this framework, achieving sustained impact also depends on enabling conditions beyond the classroom, including whole-school approaches, community support and supportive policy and system environments.



2. School Level Support for GRP



While teacher competencies are central to the implementation of GRP, the wider school environment plays a crucial role in enabling or constraining these practices. School leaders therefore play a critical role in establishing supportive whole-school conditions that allow teachers to apply gender-responsive pedagogy effectively. Research highlights that effective school leadership is pivotal in enhancing learner outcomes, primarily by shaping teaching practices, fostering teamwork among teachers, and boosting teacher satisfaction (VVOB, 2024). It is therefore important for school leaders to support the school leaders' role in promoting for gender-responsive.

i. School vision and culture for gender equality, equity, and inclusion

School leaders articulate a shared vision and model a clear commitment to gender equality, equity, and inclusion. This is achieved through policies, communication, and everyday leadership practices that build shared ownership of gender-responsive pedagogy across the school community.

ii. Creating safe and inclusive learning environments

School leaders establish policies, systems, and practices that promote learner well-

being, participation, safety, and belonging. They ensure that schools provide physically, socially, and emotionally safe spaces where all learners can participate fully and are protected from discrimination, bullying, and gender-based violence.

iii. Teacher support and professional learning for GRP

School leaders support teachers to implement and strengthen gender-responsive practices through professional learning, coaching, mentoring, collaboration, classroom observation, and constructive feedback. They allocate time and resources for peer learning and exchange.

iv. Community engagement and partnerships

School leaders build relationships with parents, caregivers, community leaders, and local organisations to strengthen support for gender-responsive pedagogy and learner wellbeing. Through dialogue, collaboration, and partnership, they help create stronger connections between schools and the communities for gender equality.

3. Community Level Support for GRP

Communities play a critical role in shaping how learners understand gender, relationships, work, participate in learning and envision their own future possibilities. The messages learners receive at home, in religious spaces, among peers, through the media, and in the wider community can either support or undermine gender-responsive teaching and learning. Community support includes:

- i. Supportive families and caregivers who encourage learning, participation, and aspirations for all learners.
- ii. Positive social norms and attitudes that promote gender equality, inclusion, and respect.

- iii. Safe and supportive environments that protect learner wellbeing and enable participation in education.
- iv. Strong community partnerships and role models that provide learners with support, mentoring, ensure learner safety and well-being, and exposure to diverse opportunities and pathways.

Meaningful engagement with families, parents and caregivers, and local actors is therefore essential for creating coherence between what learners experience at school and at home (VVOB et al, 2025, UNICEF, 2021).



4. Policy and System Level Support for GRP



For gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP) to achieve sustained impact, it must be embedded within the education system rather than implemented as a stand-alone initiative. While many countries have adopted policies and commitments that support gender equality and inclusion in education, implementation often remains uneven (VVOB et al, 2025). Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires focus on the following areas:

- **Policy alignment:** Gender-responsive principles should be reflected consistently across education policies, curricula, teacher and school leadership standards, quality assurance systems, and other key education frameworks so that expectations for implementation are clear and coherent.
- **Teacher professional development systems:** Teachers are supported to develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to implement GRP through pre-service education, induction, continuous professional development, coaching, mentoring, and collaborative lifelong learning opportunities for GRP
- **Institutional support:** Governments should provide the financial resources, implementation tools, monitoring systems, leadership, and coordination mechanisms needed to support implementation, continuous improvement, and scale. This includes partnerships among government agencies, teacher education institutions, schools, communities, and development partners

5. Five Guiding Principles for Teacher Professional Development for GRP

Developing the competencies outlined in this framework requires sustained professional learning. Effective teacher professional development combines opportunities for practice, collaboration, feedback, coaching, and critical reflection, enabling teachers to continuously strengthen their practice over

time (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Mezirow, 1991; VVOB et al., 2025). The guiding principles presented below provide a foundation for designing and implementing TPD for GRP:

The guiding principles presented here provide a foundation for designing and implementing TPD for GRP



Agency and Transformation for GRP

TPD for GRP recognises teachers as active participants in shaping and improving their practice. Through critical reflection and professional dialogue, teachers are supported to examine their beliefs and assumptions while drawing on their professional expertise and contextual knowledge to adapt, contextualise, and co-create gender-responsive approaches that respond to the needs of their learners and communities.



Structured and Progressive Learning for GRP

Gender norms, beliefs, biases, and are often deeply embedded in teacher practices. Therefore, effective professional learning requires sustained opportunities for learning, practice, reflection, feedback, and improvement. TPD for GRP should therefore provide structured learning pathways that support teachers to gradually deepen both critical gender awareness and gender-responsive pedagogical practice.



Practice-Based and Classroom-Embedded Learning for GRP

Gender inequalities are often reproduced in the classroom. Transforming these inequalities therefore requires teachers to critically engage with their own classroom strategies and practices in real learning environments. TPD should therefore enable teachers to testing, apply and refine their learnings in class.



Collaborative Professional Learning for GRP

This principle recognises that teachers learn best when they learn with and from one another. Through dialogue, peer learning, mentoring, coaching, and professional learning communities, teachers can reflect on practice, exchange experiences, and strengthen gender-responsive approaches together.



Ethical and Inclusive Foundation for GRP

TPD for GRP is grounded in values of equity, inclusion, dignity, care, human rights and social justice. It should create safe and supportive learning environments that enable teachers to engage honestly with sensitive gender issues, challenge inequality, biases and stereotypes.

Conclusion

This framework provides a foundation for designing teacher professional development for gender-responsive pedagogy across the different education levels, from early childhood to secondary education. While the core teacher competencies remain consistent, their application is shaped by learners' developmental needs, educational contexts, and local realities. The framework therefore

offers a common reference point that can be adapted across countries, regions, and education systems while maintaining a shared understanding of effective GRP practice.

The framework can support policymakers, teacher educators, curriculum experts, and TPD providers to:



Develop or strengthen TPD curricula, content, and learning resources for GRP.



Inform monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement of teacher competency development and learner outcomes



Guide the design, sequencing, and delivery of professional learning opportunities, including the resources and support required for implementation.



Support the integration of GRP into teacher education, professional standards, and ongoing professional development systems.



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