

How do teachers define “agency”?

Learnings from a Group Model Building workshop in Uganda



Teacher agency—defined as the capacity of teachers to make choices and take actions to effect change (Cong-Lem, 2021)—remains under-researched in the majority world, despite evidence from higher-resource settings linking it to improved student academic and social outcomes. There is limited understanding of how teachers define “agency” in their role in classrooms and schools and the factors that affect this agency. We gathered 18 primary school teachers from Kampala and Arua (10 urban schools, 4 peri-urban schools, and 4 rural schools) for a two-day residential workshop to help us better understand what agency means to them in their profession and the factors that affect this agency.

This research is part of a larger study *“How does agency translate into action? Understanding the mechanisms of teacher agency and well-being in Uganda”*. This study explores teacher agency within the Ugandan education reform context, focusing on better understanding how teachers define agency, how we can use those definitions to measure agency, and the relationship between agency and the actions that teachers take in their schools. The study is implemented in three stages:

Stage 1:

Group Model Building (GMB) workshop

Residential workshop with primary school teachers from Kampala and Arua to define agency, develop a shared understanding of factors affecting their agency, and create a visual representation of how it translates into action.

Stage 2:

Development and adaptation of teacher agency measure

Review existing literature on teacher agency and select measures aligning with the definition generated in Stage 1. Adapt measures and conduct cognitive interviews with teachers to ensure the measures are feasible and relevant for teachers in Uganda.

Stage 3:

Surveying teachers

Collect data from primary school teachers across 30 schools to understand the psychometric properties of the adapted measures and analyze the interaction between teachers’ agency, their actions, and student outcomes.

The focus of this brief is on Stage 1 of the study.

What did we do during the GMB workshop?

Activity 1: Day-to-day Role of a Teacher

Participants were tasked with brainstorming and creating timelines of their weekly responsibilities, sharing them within groups to identify common tasks. Teachers were also tasked with brainstorming the extra or additional tasks they do beyond their expected role, highlighting shared experiences across schools and districts.

Activity 2: Factor Elicitation

Participants identified factors that influence their ability to make choices and enact changes, using the list of day-to-day activities from the previous activity. They brainstormed both individually and in groups, creating a list of supporting and hindering factors.

Activity 3: Connection Circles

Building on the previous activity, participants mapped causal relationships and feedback loops between the identified factors. Facilitators iteratively refined the factor map, breaking it down into layers (internal, classroom & school, community & parents, policy & education system), enabling participants to co-create an ecosystem map.

Activity 4: Influential Factors

Using the ecosystem map created in the previous activity, participants ranked factors by importance and discussed the factors that had the greatest impact on their agency as teachers.

Activity 5: Defining Teacher Agency

Participants worked to co-create a contextualized definition of teacher agency. Teachers broke down a working definition of teacher agency— their capacity to make choices in their work and take action to change things in their classrooms and schools— as well as listed behaviors of teachers they know who demonstrate agency.

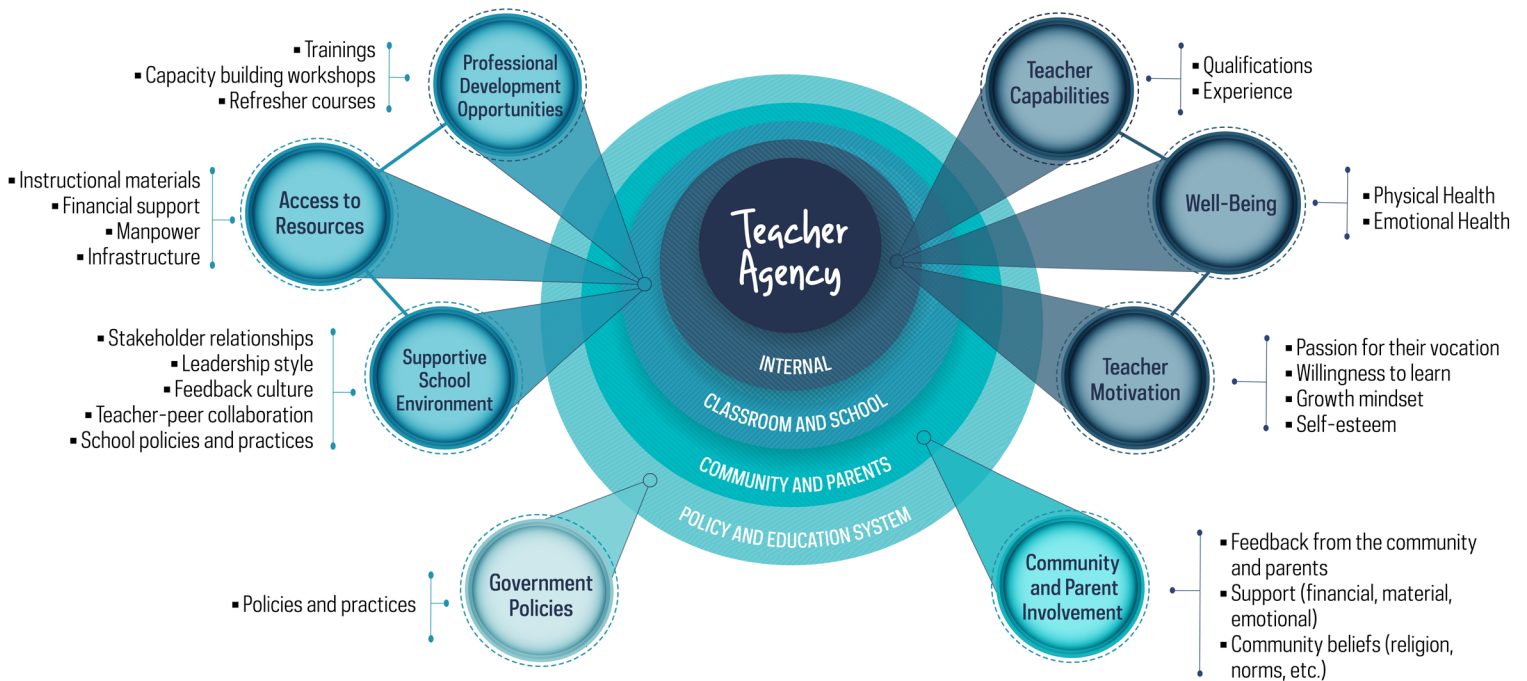
Activity 6: Overlap of Teacher Agency and Teacher Well-Being

Facilitators identified overlaps between the participants' definition of teacher agency and a previously developed definition of teacher well-being from a Ugandan teacher study (D'Sa et al., 2023). Additionally, analysis was done to identify overlaps between the factors that affect a teacher's agency and factors that affect their well-being

What did we find through this research?

Teachers defined teacher agency as “a teacher's initiative to make decisions and influence progress in the teaching and learning process.” The facilitators went through an iterative process to re-work the definition to include more of the findings and words used throughout the activities. The finalized definition and understanding of teacher agency is as follows: **Teacher Agency is a teacher's initiative to champion change in the classroom and school. It encompasses the teacher's expertise, autonomy, and decision-making power to make purposeful choices and decisions that enhance instructional practices and the overall educational experience for students.** Ultimately, teacher agency is about a teacher feeling empowered as educators to actively pursue their professional growth and seek solutions that benefit their students and school community.

Teachers identified eight key factors influencing their agency across various levels of the education ecosystem, with teacher motivation, professional development opportunities, supportive school environment, and government policies being the most significant.



Teacher Capabilities

A teacher's qualifications and experiences, gained through initial training and ongoing practice, shape their confidence and decision-making abilities. Those with relevant qualifications and diverse experiences are better equipped to adapt, refine methods, and implement innovative strategies in the classroom.

Well-Being

A teacher's physical and emotional health directly impacts their ability to perform effectively. When healthy and emotionally stable, they are more motivated and capable of going the extra mile for their students and school.

Teacher Motivation

A teacher's passion for their vocation, willingness to learn and adapt, and self-drive to improve their practices and the school environment. It is influenced by both internal factors, like self-esteem, confidence and discipline, and external support, such as feedback from school management.

Professional Development Opportunities

A teacher's participation in capacity-building workshops and refresher courses on teaching, learning, and assessment enables them to enhance their skills and take informed actions within the school. This support can come directly from the school or through the involvement of NGOs and development partners, who provide trainings and instructional materials.

Supportive School Environment

The school environment, shaped by supportive relationships and guided by systems, guidelines and policies plays a crucial role in empowering teachers. By promoting collaboration, open communication, and constructive feedback while ensuring freedom from issues like tribalism, nepotism, and gender bias, it fosters working conditions that enable teachers to independently implement meaningful changes within their classrooms and school.

Access to Resources

The availability of instructional materials, financial support, adequate staffing, and infrastructure. These resources enable teachers to implement decisions, engage students, and create effective learning environments.

Community & Parent Involvement

The support, feedback, and engagement from parents and the community (including NGOs and development partners) in school activities and children's learning—including emotional, financial, and material assistance—shape teachers' confidence and capacity to take independent actions to enhance teaching and learning.

Government Policies

The regulations on teacher qualifications, pay, learner promotion, and corporal punishment, shape the teaching and learning environment. These policies can either empower teachers or limit their ability to make independent decisions.

What are the implications of our findings?

The 18 teachers had a dynamic view of agency that focused on their initiative to champion change in their classroom and school. However, they were clear that this agency is dependent on several factors at the level of the individual teacher, their school, community, and the broader education system. Teachers were especially clear that policies at the school and system level can hinder or support their agency. A common example shared by teachers is the policy of automatic promotion of students to the next grade. This policy was seen among teachers as a hindrance to their ability to decide a student's readiness to graduate to the next grade level. Interventions to support teacher agency need to move beyond simply empowering and training individual teachers and rather look at how expected actions interact with the structural systems within which the teachers are working. In other words, agency may manifest at the individual level but it is influenced by factors that are often outside the direct control of teachers.

What are the next steps?

Stage 1 findings will guide Stage 2 by informing the selection and adaptation of teacher agency measures. The team will identify relevant measures from the extant literature that align with how Ugandan teachers defined their agency in Stage 1. These measures will be tested through cognitive interviews with 10-12 teachers from Schools2030 schools to ensure they are contextually appropriate and reliable. Based on feedback, an Adapted Teacher Agency Measure (ATAM) will be developed. Additionally, we will develop social nomination indicators from the Stage 1 findings, allowing teachers to confidentially nominate colleagues who translate their agency into action within the school. This will support a social network analysis, exploring how teacher agency relates to social network structures and dynamics within schools, and how teachers' connections to peers and administrators influence their agency and well-being.

References

- Cong-Lem, N. (2021). Teacher agency: A systematic review of international literature. *Issues in Educational Research*, 31(3), 718–738.
- D'Sa, N., Fontana, M., Ariapa, M., Chandler, H., Nsubuga, E., & Richardson, E. (2023). “Well-being, that word is very wide”: Understanding how teachers in Uganda define and navigate their occupational well-being. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 119 (April), 102185. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102185>