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Teacher agency in the reform of universal primary education in Uganda

Tom Henry Ogwang

Faculty of Education and Humanities, Gulu University, Gulu, Uganda

Correspondence
Tom Henry Ogwang, Faculty of Education and Humanities, Gulu University, P.O Box 166, Gulu, Uganda.
Email: t.h.ogwang@gu.ac.ug

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Abstract

Although teacher agency is increasingly recognised by educationists in the Global South, it is not always well understood or accommodated in policy, as experienced with Universal Primary Education (UPE) reforms in Uganda. This empirical study analyses its role on the UPE reforms, the factors that shape it and its implications for curriculum making. The study adopted a qualitative case study of two UPE schools, utilising an ecological approach to understanding teacher agency. It found that UPE teachers in the selected schools were strongly achieving agency in their daily practice through different forms of 'resistance', 'mitigation' and 'cooperation'. Their agency is being shaped by ecological factors comprising of their temporal dimensions mediated by the affordances and constraints of their cultures, structures and materials, with significant implications. The study concludes that stakeholders need to better explicate teacher agency in policy and scholarship.

KEYWORDS
curriculum development, government policy, impact evaluation, primary teachers

INTRODUCTION

Background

The role of teacher agency in mediating educational change is increasingly attracting scholarly attention, particularly in education systems in developed countries, where teachers are increasingly being positioned as 'agents of change' (Ketelaar et al., 2012; Priestley et al., 2015; Pyhältö et al., 2014). Biesta et al. (2015, p. 624) argue that it is 'important to understand the dynamics of teacher agency and the factors that contribute to its promotion

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and enhancement'. The ecological approach (Priestley et al., 2015) conceptualises teacher agency as what teachers achieve in the temporal-relational contexts-of-practice of their schools through the interplay of its properties with their professional/life histories and aspirations, which leads either to the reproduction or transformation of its 'problematic' aspects. While teacher agency is increasingly recognised, its worldwide study remains 'vague' especially in the Global South (Ogwang, 2018; see Priestley et al., 2015; Pyhältö et al., 2014). It is therefore often poorly understood and inadequately addressed in policy. In sub-Saharan Africa, only a few studies of teacher agency have been attempted, none of which broadly interrogates the basic education reform context. For example, Hanaya et al. (2020) investigate teacher agency within the scope of contemporary school safety in South Africa, while Themane and Thobejane (2019) examine how it is fostering inclusive education in secondary schools in South Africa. Although, Ssentanda and Wenske (2021) and Olema et al. (2021) are Ugandan based studies, they are confined to interrogating teacher agency in literacy reform and competency-based education, respectively. This study investigated the role of teacher agency within the broad reform context of Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) program utilising an ecological approach (see Priestley et al., 2015). Ketelaar et al. (2012, p. 273) observe that in a reform context:

> teachers actively position themselves in relation to an innovation. They make deliberate choices and compare their personal beliefs, desires and values in work with the characteristics and demands of the proposed changes.

Given the global dimensions of the ongoing basic education reforms that commenced in Jomtein in 1990, followed by the Dakar Framework in 2000 and Incheon in 2015 (UNESCO, 2015), this study makes an important contribution in interrogating UPE teachers' enactment of the ongoing reforms with broad research and policy significance.

UNESCO (2014, n.p) defines UPE as 'a system of universal, compulsory and free primary education for all', while the Ugandan government (Act, 2008, p. 9) defines it as:

> the state funded … programme where tuition fees are paid by government where the principle of equitable access to conducive, quality, relevant and affordable education is emphasised for all children.

Uganda launched UPE in 1997 under the framework of the Education Sector Investment Plan (ESIP) (1998–2003) (MoES, 1998), which entailed wide-ranging governance, access, quality, curriculum and 'environmental' reforms (Kayabwe, 2014; Penny et al., 2008; Ward et al., 2006; see UNESCO, 1990). This study was guided by the following research questions; (1) how are UPE teachers achieving agency under reforms in two selected schools? (2) what factors influence and shape the teachers' agency in the two UPE schools? (3) what are the implications of the teachers' agency for policy and practice? This study may thus contribute towards illustrating how teachers in the selected schools and in similar sub-Saharan contexts achieve agency in their daily work, how their agency influences and is influenced by ecological factors and its implications for stakeholders and policy makers.

UPE teachers' mediation of reforms

Uganda embarked on the reform of UPE's governance in the mid-nineties which comprised of building partnerships with intergovernmental organs such as UNESCO and the World Bank under Education for All (EFA), and among its national institutions. From 1997, government began devolving some functions to the local authorities and entrenching performativity

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practices (see Priestley et al., 2015) such as the use of league tables, customised performance targets for head teachers and publicising of primary leaving exams (PLE) results in the public media (Ogwang, 2018). This has spurred teachers to maintain discarded practices such as grade repetition partially for 'image fabrication', in order to protect their schools' reputation (Lewin, 2009; see Priestley et al., 2015).

Government further 'universalised' (see UNESCO, 1990) access for all children in 2003. Initially, due to resource limitations, it commenced with a policy of four children per household (Ward et al., 2006). However, under political pressure UPE was prematurely universalised in 2003. Consequently, enrolment ballooned from approximately 3 million pupils in 1996 to 8.9 million in 2017, culminating in the current 'large classes' with a pupil-classroom ratio of over 70:1, which has overwhelmed the available facilities (Byamugisha & Ogawa, 2010; MoES, 2017). Universalisation was subject to a high enrolment of underage and overage pupils whose abilities vary widely, which has affected achievement. Government therefore promoted 'age-in-grade-access' through the entry-age policy[1] and automatic promotion[2] (GoU, 1992; Lewin, 2009). However, teachers largely ignore the entry-age, while perpetuating grade repetition (Kayabwe & Nabacwa, 2014).

As a corollary to universalisation, the government launched the Teacher Development Management System (TDMS) to enhance teacher numbers and preparation (Penny et al., 2008). However, the training proved inadequate (Altinyelken, 2010a) which has limited teacher numbers and skill. This is currently reflected in the high pupil-teacher ratio of 55:1 (MoES, 2017) and their over-emphasis of more direct pedagogies such as 'chalk and talk', 'teacher-centred' and 'lecture-driven' pedagogy, at the expense of participatory ones (Altinyelken, 2010b; Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008). This is coupled with their challenges in plurilingual teaching (Abiria et al., 2013; Ssentanda, 2014). UPE therefore continues to experience persistent teacher challenges. However, some teachers are adopting pedagogies for teaching large classes such as 'co-teaching' (Nakabugo et al., 2008). They are also improving on local language teaching by using translation and 'translanguaging' where they switch between English and the local language (Abiria et al., 2013; Ssentanda & Wenske, 2021).

In addition, government established the Instructional Materials Unit (IMU) in 2000 to improve textbook supply, the School Facilities Grant (SFG) for infrastructure construction and the Capitation Grant for basic operational expenditure (Penny et al., 2008; Ward et al., 2006). However, input shortages still persist with the pupil-coursebook ratio currently at 4:1 (MoES, 2017). This limits curriculum implementation and undermines quality (Altinyelken, 2010a; Ssewamala et al., 2011). However, some teachers are redressing it by making teaching materials such as charts on their own (Altinyelken, 2010a; Nakabugo et al., 2008).

In 2007, government launched the thematic curriculum which replaced UPE's home-grown 2000 curriculum (Penny et al., 2008). It incorporated child-centred pedagogy, local language teaching and continuous assessment (Altinyelken, 2010a, 2010b; GoU, 1992; Penny et al., 2008). This curriculum has intensified teachers' workload and stress due to its 'high stakes' exams, bi-lingual teaching and the class teacher system (Altinyelken, 2010a, 2010b; Ssentanda & Wenske, 2021). Thus, some teachers are reverting to instructing lower primary in English, despite the local language teaching policy (Ogwang, 2018; Piper, 2010).

Finally, government adopted 'environmental' reform to promote conducive health and environmental conditions under UPE (see UNESCO, 1990). It launched among others the Child Friendly Basic Education and Learning program (CFBEL) and The Right of All Children to Education (TRACE) program (UNICEF, 2010) which witnessed the banning of corporal punishment in 2006. However, some teachers are perpetuating abusive punishments like caning (MoES, 2015; UNICEF, 2010; see Hanaya et al., 2020).

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Ecological influences on teachers

The UPE teachers' responses to reforms is being significantly shaped by their attributes such as the lack of capacity. This is leading some teachers to adopt more direct or teacher-centred pedagogies. Abiria et al. (2013) note that teachers lack understanding of how to navigate the restricted oral use of a relevant local language to explain complex concepts. This leads them to feel pressured to make an abrupt change to English only, which curtails their agency.

The teachers' attributes are also significantly influencing their responses to reforms such as local language teaching and the ban on corporal punishment. Ssentanda and Wenske (2021) note that UPE teachers take an 'either/or', rather than bilingual construction of UPE's mother tongue policy. Indeed, many teachers believe that teaching mother-tongue hinders the acquisition of English, consequently its time is often diverted for teaching other subjects (Ssentanda, 2014). The teachers also generally believe that caning is the only effective form of punishment, thus, corporal punishment remains widespread (MoES, 2015). Some teachers' negative perceptions about the thematic curriculum is also influencing their responses which leads them to mediate it in several ways (Ogwang, 2018; Ssentanda & Wenske, 2021). For example, to shield their pupils from its perceived limitations, some teachers prepare a dual lesson scheme; one based on the official curriculum for appraisal purposes and another for their daily practices (Ssentanda & Wenske, 2021).

The policy reform context is also influencing teachers' responses. Abiria et al. (2013, p. 569) describe UPE as a 'policy constrained context' due to its 'authoritarian' language education policy which 'restricts teachers from employing forms of instruction that encourage knowledge transfer across languages'. UPE's 'high stakes' examination system also constrains teachers to focus primarily on teaching students to pass exams (Altinyelken, 2010b). Finally, environmental factors such as large classes are also prompting teachers to adopt new pedagogies such as co-teaching (Nakabugo et al., 2008).

Implications of the teachers' initiatives

The teachers' mediation of UPE reforms carry several implications. For example, grade repetition is linked with over enrolment which undermines education quality (Lewin, 2009) and delayed progression, which reduces 'education efficiency' leading to increased costs (MoES, 2014, 2008). Furthermore, teachers' mediation of the thematic curriculum is noted to undermine its holistic delivery (Altinyelken, 2010a; Nakabugo et al., 2008). However, the teachers' fabrication of some teaching materials like charts has been applauded, on the one hand, for minimising dependency (Nakabugo et al., 2008), and also criticised for costing teachers a lot of time and energy (Altinyelken, 2010a). Finally, the teachers' mediation of local language teaching through translation and 'translanguaging' is being hailed for increasing pupil participation and comprehension (Abiria et al., 2013; Altinyelken, 2010a). The foregoing review underscores the paucity of teacher agency literature about Uganda and Global South contexts. It therefore exposes a significant gap which this study sought to fill.

AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO TEACHER AGENCY

The UPE context is complex and multifaceted which has necessitated an appropriate analytical heuristic such as ecological teacher agency (ETA) (Priestley et al., 2015) for its study. Priestley et al. (2015, p. 29) conceive their approach as both a 'methodological' and 'theoretical' framework for interrogating teachers' agency in their professional contexts. It is

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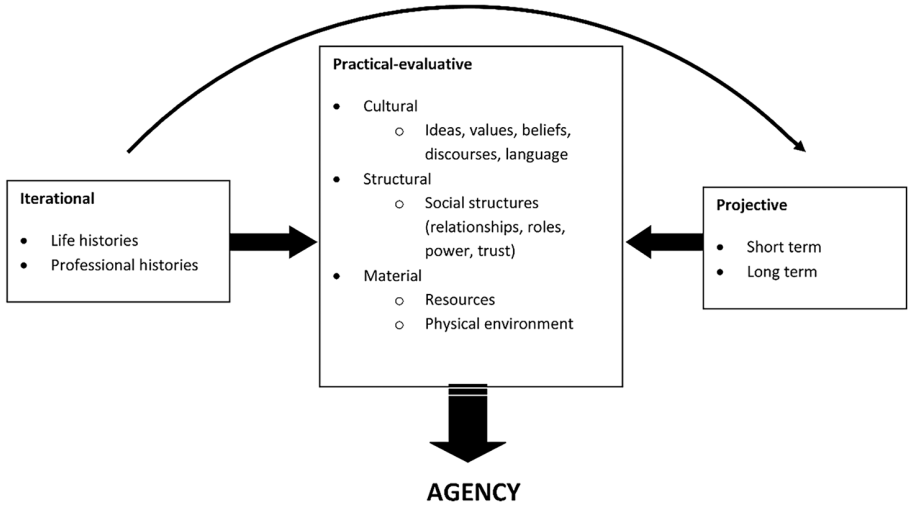

FIGURE 1 Ecological teacher agency (source Priestley et al., 2015, p. 30)

theoretical in that it elaborates overarching principles of ETA and methodological by virtue of explicating its analytical procedure, including abductive categories to be interrogated. The key dimensions of their approach are represented in Figure 1.

ETA is temporal as it comprises iterational (past), projective (future) and practical-evaluative (present) dimensions or orientations, which are normally experienced as a chordal triad of varying strengths (see Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The iterational dimension illustrates that teachers' achievement of agency is influenced by their past experiences and habit (biography), which in turn influences how they might respond to day-to-day (practical-evaluative) contextual issues such as inadequate teaching resources (materials) or policy changes in their practice. The projective dimension concerns teachers' ability to visualise alternative futures (aspirations), both short and longer term, which may relate to the students' broad educational development or may be more narrowly instrumental such as image fabrication. Finally, the practical-evaluative dimension concerns teachers' day-to-day navigation of the working environment which is mediated by cultures (e.g., teachers' beliefs and discourses), structures (e.g., teachers' roles and relationships) and materials (e.g., resources and the physical environment). This illustrates that agency is always acted out in the present and that it is relational as well as temporal, being dependent on structural, cultural and material affordances and constraints. This 'analytical separation' of agency enables the analysis of when each domain is more 'facilitating or inhibiting' towards the achievement of agency (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 30).

THE PRESENT STUDY

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative case study involving two purposively selected UPE schools, each given a pseudonym. Achievement data from Uganda's designated examinations bodies, Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) and UWEZO were analysed to extract critical cases (see Flyvbjerg, 2006). The District Education Officers (DEOs) of Central and Eastern district where the identified schools are located were then consulted over criteria such as staffing, student enrolment and accessibility in order to determine the final schools. These

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were Mirembe Primary School in Central district and Elgonia in Eastern district, both of which were critical cases arising from their average performance in primary leaving examinations (PLE). The selection sought the 'rich data' expected to emerge from the complex social interactions in the schools. Other key features including UPE's predominantly rural base and local language teaching were further targeted to broaden relevance and enable comparison between the cases. The study subsequently focused upon four participants in each school:

- a primary two teacher each (Christine from Mirembe and Juliet from Elgonia), as key informants for the local language instruction phase;
- a primary four teacher each (Aisha from Mirembe and Robert from Elgonia), for the transition to English instruction phase;
- and a primary six teacher each (David from Mirembe and Charles from Elgonia), for the English instruction phase in upper primary, in addition to each school's head teacher.

The selection further included their respective local authorities specifically DEOs, Resident District Commissioners (RDCs), School Management Committee (SMC) parent representatives and Centre Coordinating Tutors (CCTs) who provided further in-depth data regarding the schools' contextual properties.

Fieldwork was conducted in two phases between September 2015 and March 2016 using semi-structured interviews, observation coupled with note taking and photography (Merriam, 2001) and primary document analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The researcher gathered interview data from each participant about the schools' cultures, structures and materials and conducted observations which captured significant features of the schools, including their emphasis of certain values, for example, as displayed on posters (see Ball et al., 2012) to establish their contextual properties. The researcher further conducted personal and professional interviews with each teacher and observed their English lesson to establish their attributes such as qualifications, experience, skill, beliefs and aspirations. The primary documents collected such as circulars, staff roles, student enrolments and inspection reports were mostly photographed and later subjected to directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) which further elucidated the schools' cultures, structures and teachers' biographies. The data was reviewed after each session, including audio recordings, observation notes/photos and documents (see Thornberg, 2012). This enabled the iterative revision of the instruments to further probe emergent categories in subsequent sessions. In phase two, the researcher re-interviewed each participant with the same objectives using the revised instruments to capture more nuanced explications of the school contexts and teachers' biographies.

Ethical approval for the study was received from the researcher's institution's research ethics committee, and the study was conducted in line with BERA's (2011) ethical guidelines. Some of the data was sensitive as it comprised in-depth information about UPE's ecology, the participants' attitudes and responses towards government policies and the teachers' professional backgrounds. Confidentiality of the data and anonymity of the participants and sites was therefore ensured by adopting pseudonyms and omitting identifiers during the study and in this paper.

As fieldwork progressed, the researcher began in-depth data analysis using abduction (see Thornberg, 2012). Initial coding (Rieger, 2019) commenced with interrogating/testing the interview transcripts, observation notes/photos and primary documents using ETA's primary categories which include teachers' life/professional histories (biography), the schools' social structures and the broader and local school cultures. The researcher subsequently deepened the analysis using ETA's focused codes (Rieger, 2019) such as qualifications, experience, roles, relationships, beliefs, discourses and aspirations (see Priestley et al., 2015). Finally, a process of open coding was applied on the emerging data to provide more nuanced accounts

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of UPE's ecology (see Biesta et al., 2015). This enabled the construction of comprehensive contextual profiles for each school and biography for each teacher, to highlight how they interact in shaping the teachers' achievement of agency. In the following section, I provide a brief contextual profile of each school.

The schools

Mirembe Primary School is located in Central District which is inhabited by the *Baganda* tribe. It is a low-income rural area whose people mainly thrive on subsistence farming and petty trade. Mirembe uses UPE's generic administrative structure which comprises of a School Management Committee (SMC) which holds ultimate authority, while a head teacher assisted by a deputy handles daily administration. Its total student population was under 250 pupils, which contrasts sharply with the district's estimated catchment of 470 pupils per school. Mirembe's pupil-teacher ratio stood at approximately 24:1 and pupil-classroom ratio at 30:1. The head teacher noted that it was under-enrolled, like most of its neighbouring UPE schools situated close to the main road. This is due to the 'mushrooming' of private schools considered to be performing better (see World Bank, 2013; Zuze & Leibbrandt, 2011). The private schools charge low tuition fees, offer some free scholastic materials and provide exclusive English instruction, contrary to government policy.

Mirembe has large classrooms with sufficient desks. Each classroom can hold over fifty pupils each. However, it lacks a primary three classroom, which the DEO attributed to the lack of land. Thus, its lessons are conducted in the adjacent Catholic chapel. It also lacks staff accommodation and a staffroom, thus, staff activities such as meetings and lunch are held in the primary five classroom during recess. Mirembe's single office is reserved for the head teacher. Mirembe had eight qualified and one unqualified teacher, seven of whom were designated as class teachers. The majority of Mirembe's pupils appeared young for their grade, which implied under-age enrolment. Mirembe's pupil absenteeism which is attributed to parents engaging their children in domestic chores is also high, estimated at roughly 30 percent (see Byamugisha & Ogawa, 2010). Mirembe usually performs best in English and science. However, its performance had declined following UPE's launch which affected many schools (see Ward et al., 2006; World Bank, 2013). However, Aisha the primary four teacher hailed her students' improvement in English since Mirembe abandoned local language teaching.

Elgonia Primary School is located in Eastern District which is home to the *Sebei*. It is a rural area characterised by low incomes derived from subsistence farming and cattle keeping. Like Mirembe, it follows UPE's generic administrative structure. Several private schools had recently opened in Elgonia's vicinity and their enrolment was increasing steadily. Elgonia had over 800 pupils, with a pupil-teacher ratio of approximately 66:1 and a pupil-classroom ratio of roughly 117:1, with primary six recording the highest enrolment. However, its high pupil absenteeism, estimated at 40 percent offsets Elgonia's actual daily attendance (see Lewin, 2009). Elgonia's classrooms are large and well-stocked with desks and can hold between one hundred to two hundred pupils each. However, it lacked a staffroom and staff accommodation and had only one large office designated for the head teacher. However, this had been furnished with several desks which were being shared by all the staff. Elgonia had twelve teachers as opposed to the allotted sixteen. Although rated among the best schools in Eastern District, Elgonia's performance corresponded with Mirembe's due to the high regional disparity in performance. Elgonia's performance in English was fair despite its continued adherence to local language teaching.

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FINDINGS: THE TEACHERS' AGENCY IN DAILY PRACTICE (PRACTICAL-EVALUATIVE DIMENSION)

'Resistance' to policy reforms

The findings indicate that Mirembe and Elgonia teachers were significantly achieving agency in more direct response to macro policy reforms, which tallies with UPE's strongly prescriptive context (see Abiria et al., 2013) compared, for example, to Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence where teacher agency is being encouraged (Priestley et al., 2015). For example, triggered by reforms like the new automatic promotion policy, the teachers in both schools were 'resisting', which implies a habitual or iterational orientation. However, Sannino (2010) equates 'resistance' with early forms of agency, rather than 'inherent conservatism', which the teachers' 'talk' (see Priestley et al., 2015) appeared to corroborate. Christine denounced automatic promotion as causing 'half-baked pupils [to] go to next classes and those teachers find problems there', while Aisha observed that it was causing many failures in p7, 'which does not sound well'. Juliet observed that:

> Mass promotion, to me I feel it should not be, because there are those ones who need to repeat and to be guided properly before they go to another class. That is what I feel that it should not be mass promotion. So that we assist the slow learners.

The influence of the teachers' beliefs concerning their role (see Priestley et al., 2015) to "guide" and "assist" learners and ensure they pass exams clearly emerges in their "talk". Both schools were therefore applying their 'local arrangement', which involves inviting a parent and agreeing with them over retaining their child in case of poor performance. David, a qualified Grade 3 Diploma holder with over six years' teaching experience in primary six in Mirembe appeared comfortable with the arrangement and explained its underlying aim:

> what we do these days, we at least adjust on the policies of the government. We call the parents and we discuss. Should we promote to such and such [sic] a child to the next class? It is the parent to decide.

Since parents generally heed their advice, grade repetition is therefore being practiced in both schools. The latest government report estimates it at 9.7 percent countrywide (MoES, 2017; see Lewin, 2009).

The teachers in both schools were also resisting the ban on corporal punishment which similarly reflects a recourse to their habitual disciplinary practices. Robert, the primary four teacher in Elgonia complained that the ban exacerbates indiscipline, undermines achievement and that parents were responding poorly to alternatives like counselling. Despite his support for the ban, Robert, who had over ten years' experience alongside his Grade 3 Diploma observed that:

> pupils of UPE schools, some of them are undisciplined, just because they know there are rights which protect them. So, they just do anything they wish.

His stand underscores the confounding influence of the teachers' underlying belief in corporal punishment (MoES, 2015). Thus, some parents and indeed experienced teachers like Robert were conniving against the ban. Charles revealed that:

> some [parents] are coming secretly to say you punish mine, so that he can do better because the policy says no corporal punishment. Most parents are realising that children when caned are disciplined only to perform better, not to be beaten badly.

As implied in Charles' talk, their response therefore appears linked to an underlying belief among UPE teachers that education is for the purpose of passing exams (Ssentanda & Wenske, 2021). Corporal punishment was therefore being covertly practiced in both schools.

Mirembe teachers had further abandoned the new local language teaching policy which implies an iterational inclination towards English instruction. Contrary to policy, they had reverted to instructing the lower classes in English, while teaching *Luganda* as a subject. As noted repeatedly in UPE teachers' discourses (Abiria et al., 2013; Ssentanda, 2014; Ssentanda & Wenske, 2021), they reasoned that local language teaching obstructs English acquisition, external providers set prep exams in English and the work is 'difficult', which underscores not only their negative beliefs, but also skills gaps which were particularly highlighted in Aisha and David's lessons. Aisha a qualified teacher who had twelve years' prior experience of instructing learners exclusively in English and now handles Mirembe's transition from *Luganda* to English in primary four underscored the challenge:

> You can sweat and sweat. Those pupils! You can put there a subject for example SST, that is their first time to hear about the word SST, social studies, they do not understand. Most of the words are new to them because in those classes, they were learning in their local languages. So, you found [sic] a very big problem here in P.4 first term.

The teachers' preference for English instruction, which has been linked to their belief that it proffers academic and social advantage (Ssentanda & Wenske, 2021) therefore appears to influence their response, at least in part. This obscures the teachers' underlying instrumental motives. Thus, Aisha had supported Mirembe's decision to abandon the policy.

The entry-age policy was also facing the teachers' 'indifference' or passive resistance for reasons not immediately clear, which had caused significant underage enrolment in both schools. Rather than admit responsibility for Elgonia's underage enrolment, the teachers blamed it on the parents. Juliet observed that:

> at times some of them, they send the young ones to accompany even the younger ones. But they are not getting what they are teaching.

In Mirembe's case, however, it was apparent that the teachers' response partially stems from their intention of exploiting the weak inspection system to enhance their school's enrolment in order to comply with government and donor targets, which reflects a projective orientation.

Some Elgonia teachers were also 'resisting' the new thematic curriculum by teaching topics it has omitted (see Ssentanda & Wenske, 2021) which they believe are important for their pupils' future performance, which implies a projective aspiration. Charles, the Elgonia primary six teacher who holds both a Bachelor's degree and Grade 5 Diploma and had over 15 years' teaching experience, which arguably enrich his critical repertoire (see Priestley et al., 2015) explained that:

> We go far to teach those lessons, outside the syllabus, because we look at it as very important for the child. That is what we do. You search the books, even this P6 syllabus put certain things out which are very important for the children.

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Thus, he adopts a form of 'protective mediation' (Priestley et al., 2015) due to his underlying beliefs about the curriculum's limitations (see Ssentanda & Wenske, 2021). This is coupled with his instrumentalist beliefs in 'teaching to the test', which broadly reflects UPE teachers' discourses about education purpose.

Mitigation of material gaps

The teachers were also achieving agency by mitigating some material gaps in their schools (see Byamugisha & Ogawa, 2010; Ogwang, 2018; Ssewamala et al., 2011). For example, both schools were improvising in the context of inadequate coursebooks. In Aisha's lesson, the entire class had only three coursebooks. The teachers are advised to combine the curriculum and teachers' guide to formulate content where no coursebook is available, which invokes a practical-evaluative orientation. Christine, Mirembe's primary two teacher who had over fifteen years' experience alongside her Grade 3 qualification explained that:

> we just form poems, rhymes, according to our experience, so that we can combine that poem with the theme to teach the pupils. Because we don't have them. We don't have reference books, except the curriculum and the teachers' guide.

The teachers were therefore bridging the gap through improvising based on experience which also implicates their iterational dimension. Furthermore, they were preparing their own teaching charts, most especially Christine and Juliet, the primary two teachers (see Altinyelken, 2010a; Nakabugo et al., 2008). They were also borrowing coursebooks from neighbouring schools. Charles explained that:

> we have a school who were given this Comprehensive SST and our school has no Comprehensive. I have tried to borrow one for P6 and P7. Those ones are assisting us now here. That is how to manage scarcity. If we get some little UPE [funds], we buy.

All the teachers were further copying content on the chalkboard, or sharing coursebooks with pupils. Their agency was therefore enabling learning to continue amidst the shortages.

The lower primary teachers like Christine were further translating required sections of the curriculum and teachers' guide into *Luganda*, since both are published in English, which draws on their iterational resources. Thus, she noted that:

> you have to move, interact with other teachers and ask them. So that you can get more information about what you are going to teach.

The teachers were also improvising in order to cope with the inadequate infrastructures which were undermining their work. For example, due to lack of rooms, Mirembe's teachers were delivering their primary three lessons in the community chapel. Furthermore, they were utilising their primary five classroom as a staffroom during recess and commuting from their homes due to lack of staff accommodation. Similarly, Elgonia's teachers were commuting from home and sharing their head teacher's office as a staffroom. All these practical-evaluative initiatives were helping avert infrastructure crises and therefore maintain learning.

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Increased cooperation amidst contextual challenges

In response to their new challenges, the teachers were also cooperating increasingly, which draws on their relational resources (structure) supported by their knowledge and experience (iterational). For instance, they were sharing knowledge such as translating the curriculum into local languages, or interpreting the meanings of local words. According to Juliet, a qualified senior teacher with over 25 years' experience, who was clearly an important resource in Elgonia:

> when you find difficulty in teaching maybe a word in the mother tongue or any new given policy, we come round all of us as teachers, we share. 'Please how do you handle such and such a situation?' So, with the group or with our team, we come out with the solution.

Her 'talk' emphasises the influence of 'sharing' or 'collaboration' (see Priestley et al., 2015) and more broadly the 'teamwork' discourse currently growing under UPE (see Penny et al., 2008; World Bank, 2018). Furthermore, the teachers were swapping lessons. For example, Robert had swapped English lessons with the primary four class teacher in Elgonia. Thus, he was handling its transition from local language to English instruction, albeit without formal training. He explained that:

> we negotiated with the class teacher of that class. That teacher requested me to assist her in English.

His 'talk' references relational elements such as 'negotiation' and 'assistance', which further underscores its significance among the teachers.

The teachers were also merging classes or substituting where a colleague is absent. Ultimately, they support each other beyond the school boundary, for example, financially through a rotating fund and in times of crisis. Aisha observed that:

> we are cooperative. We are working together. Even if you are not present, other teachers can come and teach your lessons in your class. They can ask you, when you lost [sic] a relative, or any person related to you, they can cooperate and bring the condolence. And if you are near the school, they can send children to come and work simple, simple activities for example fetching water, washing plates.

This reflects the strong cooperation among the teachers in both schools.

The foregoing presentation illustrates the achievement of agency by Mirembe and Elgonia teachers under UPE reforms in the practical-evaluative domain. This is through 'resisting' some policy reforms, 'mitigating' some inadequate resources and cooperating increasingly amidst their changing relationships. The teachers' agency is shaped by their biographical attributes i.e., iterational and projective factors and mediated through the affordances and constraint of contextual factors such as cultures, structures and material resources. In the following discussion, I further examine how iterational and projective factors are shaping the teachers' agency.

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DISCUSSION

Iterational dimension

The importance of the iterational dimension emerges from the teachers' mediation of the ban on corporal punishment. The practice remains widespread, characterised by abusive punishments such as caning, forcing pupils to stare at the sun, carrying big stones and pinching (MoES, 2015). The teachers' retrogressive response implies underlying iterational influence, given their intention of maintaining the status quo (see Priestley et al., 2015). However, Charles strongly suggested that teachers respond due to their belief that corporal punishment may motivate pupils to work harder. This concurs with Priestley et al.'s (2015) argument that teachers' beliefs about the purpose of education, for example being exams directed, influences their agency in daily practice. Yet, the teachers' long-term goal would also seem geared towards improving their pupils' achievement, which implicates the projective dimension.

However, the observations of some teachers' like Robert, who showed inexperience of alternative disciplinary approaches, coupled with sense-making challenges (see Ogwang, 2018) highlights how iterational factors may curtail the teachers' agency (see Priestley et al., 2015). Finally, the teachers' grounding in their professional and wider cultural environment, which until recently condoned corporal punishment (see UNICEF, 2010) is also complicit in their habitual response. Consequently, it may be argued that in this instance the iterational dimension appears to be the most influential.

The teachers' agency further emerged in regard to their increasing adoption of relational practices such as ‘collaboration’ in their daily practice. Although one may argue that the teachers are ultimately driven by the long-term goal of sustaining learning, which implicates the projective dimension, their cooperation is essentially habitual and strongly anchored in their professional repertoire (see Priestley et al., 2016). It is therefore plausible that the iterational dimension constitutes their dominant influence in this case.

Projective dimension

In several cases, the teachers' agency was apparently triggered by the passing of new UPE policies. A key instance is the teachers' rejection of automatic promotion which is broadly reflected in the high rate of grade repetition nationally (Kayabwe & Nabacwa, 2014; MoES, 2017). Some teachers like Christine attributed their response to the difficulties of teaching weak pupils at a higher grade. Consequently, iterational factors curtail their agency owing to their reluctance or inability to adapt, hence ‘following the line of least resistance’ (see Priestley et al., 2016, p. 196). The teachers further argued that automatic promotion prioritises resource utilisation ahead of education quality (see Kayabwe & Nabacwa, 2014; MoES, 2008), which reflects their practical-evaluative concerns. However, it appeared that the teachers mainly aim to improve their pupils' performance before they sit the ‘high stakes’ PLE in grade 7, owing to the high attrition rate accompanied by an underlying aim of ‘image fabrication’ (Wamala & Seruwagi, 2013; World Bank, 2018; see Priestley et al., 2015). Lewin (2009, p. 163) suggests that grade six repetition is high because ‘pupils are kept out of the grade 7 PLE, if they are thought unlikely to do well [because] school examinations results are published and strongly influence a school's reputation’. Thus, their agency here would seem to be shaped by their dominant projective orientation.

Secondly, the Mirembe teachers' ‘performative implementation’ (see Ball et al., 2012) of local language teaching would appear to ensue from its innate limitations. The teachers aban-

doned it claiming that it obstructs English acquisition and thus learning, external prep exams are set in English, and it is 'difficult'. In the first two cases that constitute realistic objections or 'principled reflexivity' (see Priestley et al., 2016), their practical-evaluative beliefs/concerns over achievement appear to be implicated. However, in the third case where teachers see local language teaching as 'difficult', iterational issues are apparent.

For instance, some teachers had not received the 'short' pre-launch training, which many UPE teachers still considered 'severely inadequate' (Altinyelken, 2010a). Furthermore, all Mirembe's teachers having studied and later trained to teach specifically in English, could be construed as English biased and inadequately skilled in local language teaching (Piper, 2010; Ssentanda, 2014; World Bank, 2013). As such, iterational factors would therefore pose an obstacle to their agency. However, instrumental driven projective factors may account most significantly for the teachers' agency. Mirembe's enrolment had critically declined owing to parents transferring their children to private schools in search of exclusive English instruction (see Ogwang, 2018). In response, the teachers therefore appear to have deliberately reverted to teaching lower primary in English in order to recoup their enrolment in line with government and donor targets. Thus, the teachers' projective orientation appears to constitute their main influence.

Thirdly, the teachers' seeming apathy to the new entry-age was also implicated in their achievement of agency. Lewin (2009, p. 151) notes that 'Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have generated commitments to improve … access to education'. This is currently monitored using district league tables and United Nations SDG 4 (see UNESCO, 2015; Ward et al., 2006). Such sanctions appear to influence the teachers' defensive choice to prioritise access at the expense of the entry-age. They therefore succumb to expedience or 'going with the flow' (see Priestley et al., 2015); consequently, practical-evaluative concerns such as avoiding official sanctions in UPE's 'authoritarian' climate (see Abiria et al., 2013) curtails their agency. However, as noted earlier, Mirembe's teachers were significantly admitting underage pupils especially in primary one, in order to enhance their enrolment. Consequently, it would seem that the teachers had adopted a dominant projective orientation in their achievement of agency.

Finally, some Elgonia teachers were achieving agency in their coverage of topics omitted by the new thematic curriculum. This concurs with Ssentanda and Wenske (2021) who found that there is rampant mediation of the thematic curriculum by UPE teachers. It might be argued that teachers like Charles draw on their iterational resources such as knowledge and experience in order to identify and 'redress' the new curriculum's 'gaps'. Furthermore, their immediate motive would appear anchored on the 'value' of ensuring wholesome learning, which implicates the practical-evaluative dimension. However, Charles' 'talk' revealed his underlying belief in 'teaching to the test' with the ultimate aspiration of ensuring his pupils' readiness for UPE's 'high stakes' exams in primary seven (see Altinyelken, 2010b; Lewin, 2009). Thus, a dominant projective orientation appears to constitute his primary influence.

Implications of the findings

The study findings carry significant implications for UPE policy and practice. Most critically, grade repetition which results from the teachers' projective aspiration to protect their schools' image, causes over enrolment which undermines education quality (Lewin, 2009; Nakabugo et al., 2008). It further undermines 'education efficiency' by delaying progression, which increases the education unit cost per pupil (MoES, 2008). Estimates (MoES, 2014) indicate that repetition squanders at least 57 percent of Uganda's scarce education resources, which is a high price indeed. With this awareness it is hoped that government and other stakehold-

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ers could take steps to address its root causes, for example, by revisiting the performativity practice of publicising PLE results in the media which triggers this practice. Furthermore, government could invest more in teaching materials, whose shortage often constrains teachers to retain pupils due to the poor quality of learning (Ogwang, 2018).

The teachers' enrolment of underage pupils arising from their projective aspiration to meet government and donor targets has also been linked to resource wastage, since these pupils often fail to handle the curriculum (Lewin, 2009). Altinyelken (2010a) notes that underage enrolment exacerbates the differences in pupils' ability, which affects achievement. This has compounded the low achievement and dropout under UPE, consequently undermining stakeholders' confidence (Lewin, 2009; World Bank, 2013). With this insight, government could therefore undertake interventions such as enhancing communications about entry-age compliance and relaxing its/donors high enrolment expectations, which is partially fuelling the problem. In addition, increasing parental accountability such as requiring them to accompany their child for enrolment could significantly ameliorate the challenge.

The continued practice of corporal punishment due to the teachers' underlying beliefs, habitual inclinations and inexperience of alternative methods further undermines pupils' rights and government's efforts in improving the learning environment (UNICEF, 2010; see Hanaya et al., 2020). It is further implicated in both the increasing dropouts and high pupil absenteeism which has been recorded as high as 40 percent (Lewin, 2009; Ogwang, 2018). Although government is currently addressing it by jointly sensitising teachers together with organs like UNICEF (UNICEF, 2010), more effort is still required as the practice remains rampant.

The Mirembe teachers' abandonment of local language teaching mainly due to their projective aspiration to recoup their school's enrolment in line with government/donor targets is both robbing pupils of its benefits and undermining stakeholders' confidence (Abiria et al., 2013). Ogwang (2018) notes that this trend heightens the risk of other eligible schools defaulting. This could be addressed by reforming the policy such that it is uniformly enforced in all rural schools, whether UPE or private in order to reduce competition (see Ssentanda & Wenske, 2021). This could be accompanied by requiring commercial exams distributers to prepare local languages prep exams only for the lower classes in rural areas (see Ssentanda & Wenske, 2021).

Finally, the teachers' increased cooperation which draws on their relational resources and their mitigation of inadequate materials through their ingenuity, proactiveness and experience is delivering positive results by helping to bridge the knowledge and resources gaps and thus maintain learning. They therefore deserve reinforcement through more consistent in-service mentoring and support by strengthening the Centre Coordinating Tutor (CCT) system (see Ogwang, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study provided a novel case on ecological teacher agency in a broad reform context in the Global South where few previous studies exist. In response to research question one, the study found that UPE teachers in the selected schools are strongly achieving agency in varied ways such as ‘resisting’ some policy reforms, ‘mitigating’ some inadequate resources and cooperating increasingly amidst their changing relationships. On research question two, the study found that their agency is being shaped by ecological factors which comprise of their iterational dimension, particularly their experience/professional repertoire coupled with their projective dimension, driven mainly by instrumental aspirations. Meanwhile, they are achieving agency in their daily practice or practical-evaluative dimension, mediated mainly by beliefs about their roles and purpose of education (culture), relationships (struc-

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ture) and resources challenges (material). These triadic dimensions simultaneously influence their agency with varying magnitude (see Priestley et al., 2015). On a positive note, the findings indicate that the teachers' increased cooperation and mitigation of inadequate materials is helping to maintain learning. However, their resistance to some new policies is undermining education quality and exacerbating costs, which could be addressed by revising some policies and practices. Thus, the study underscores the importance of giving greater attention to teacher agency in both policy and scholarship.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved by the University of Stirling Research Ethics Committee. All participants gave consent to participate.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

ORCID

Tom Henry Ogwang https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4774-5339

ENDNOTES

[1] Entry-age is stated by the Government White Paper on Education (1992) as six years (GOU 1992).

[2] 'Automatic promotion' prescribes 'no repetition', or automatic progression by pupils from one grade to the next irrespective of their performance (MoES, 2015).

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