



Rethinking Teacher Professional Development in Public Secondary Schools in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Effective teacher professional development practices are instrumental to the performance of schools as teachers play a pivotal role in shaping academic achievements for learners in any country. In Zimbabwe, economic and social challenges have affected the availability, relevance, and effectiveness of professional development for teachers in public secondary schools. The principals' lack of instructional leadership and poor management skills have exacerbated the situation. Major gaps exist between current practices and strategic goals, highlighting the need for improved professional development. The study is motivated by the urgent need to rethink and redefine professional development in schools in Zimbabwe to improve teacher performance and retention. Situated in the interpretivism paradigm, this qualitative study used semi-structured interviews and document study to gather data. Findings highlight the urgent need for context-specific, continuous, and culturally responsive professional development programmes that address classroom management, discipline, and indigenous knowledge systems. Additionally, the study identifies the need for leadership training, enhanced support systems, and incentives for teacher engagement in professional development. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on human capital development in education, offering practical recommendations for improving professional development in resource-constrained and challenging environments.

Keywords: teacher professional development, Zimbabwe public secondary schools, instructional practices, teacher retention, context-specific training, leadership training.



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ISSN 2655-9722, DOI: 10.30650/ajte.v7i1.4228

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

Professional development (PD) is a cornerstone of any human capital management system, as the effectiveness of teachers determines the quality of education in any country. As global education systems evolve, PD has become increasingly instrumental in equipping teachers with skills to navigate technological advancements, changing pedagogical paradigms, and diverse classroom dynamics. In Zimbabwe, the implementation of PD programs faces numerous challenges and has failed to equip teachers with the essential skills to handle classroom challenges effectively (Christenson & Makokoro, 2023). Mugwaze (2022) contends that there is a gap in policy relating to teacher professional development in schools. Consequently, this absence of precise policy instruments has led to inconsistent practices, resulting in the lack of standardised procedures for teacher professional development. Economic constraints, political instability, and a lack of coherent support systems have exacerbated these challenges. Thus, there is an urgent need for a paradigm shift to rethink and redefine teacher professional development to improve the quality of instruction, ensure continuous and relevant professional growth, and enhance teaching effectiveness and academic performance in public secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

The Zimbabwean education system, deeply rooted in a colonial legacy of racial segregation, has seen Teacher Professional Development (TPD) in Zimbabwe undergo major transformations, particularly in response to the evolving educational landscape and the need for improved teaching quality (Ngwenya, 2021). In 2019, Zimbabwe's Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education developed a continuous Professional Development Framework (PDF) that has guided the implementation of professional development programmes in schools (MOESC, 2020). The framework was designed to respond to the new curriculum in 2017, prompting teachers to acquire new competencies aligned with the latest demands. The TEACH programme, funded by UK Aid, was implemented as a professional development program focusing on improving teacher effectiveness and ensuring equitable access to quality education. (Education Development Trust, 2023). In addition, the Rapid Teacher Training, pronounced in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, was launched to equip teachers with open, distance, and online learning skills. The programmes were meant to mitigate learning losses experienced during school closures by enhancing teachers' digital skills and pedagogical approaches for remote education (Walker, 2023). Despite all these initiatives, professional development programmes have failed to produce lasting change and have, therefore, been inadequate in meeting the needs of teachers and school leaders (Burns et al., 2015; World Bank, 2018). Consequently, most public schools, especially those in rural settings,

struggle with poor performance due to inadequate professional development opportunities for their teachers.

Zimbabwean schools operate in a turbulent political, economic, social, and technological instability. The economy is characterised by a persistent rise in inflation levels, leading to the erosion of earnings, rampant inflation, and severe currency depreciation. These challenges have affected teacher salaries and present substantial challenges in motivating and retaining teachers, ultimately decreasing the quality of education (Ngwenya, 2023). Financial constraints have also severely restricted funding for professional development, forcing the government to relinquish its role and make schools make their arrangements (Ngwenya, 2021). Consequently, many teachers lack professional development opportunities, depriving them of opportunities to be updated with new teaching methodologies and technologies, thereby perpetuating their reliance on outdated practices. The underfunded nature of education in Zimbabwe programmes has made it challenging for teachers and principals to access professional development programmes (Ngwenya, 2021). In addition, the geographical dispersion of rural schools has posed logistical challenges for providing professional development as teachers have to travel long distances to attend sessions. Thus, the lack of resources, insufficient funding and limited access to technology have hindered the provision of effective professional development (Singh & Mukeredzi, 2024)

PD encompasses processes to improve teacher skills, knowledge, and effectiveness that allow them to stay updated with current teaching strategies, technologies, and knowledge, thereby improving their instructional practices and student outcomes (Desimone, 2009; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, (2021). Continuous, collaborative PD, including Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), mentoring, and coaching, have successfully improved instructional practices and fostered peer learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Sims et al., 2023). Empirical studies of PD programs on teaching practice and student achievement indicate that well-designed, sustained PD positively influences teacher motivation and performance. Simirlary Popova, Evans, Breeding and Arancibia. (2022) found a positive link between teacher professional development, teaching practices, and student achievement. Despite these established principles, many PD programs in Zimbabwe fall short of these benchmarks due to systemic barriers from limited funding, political instability, and logistical challenges. Moreover, the absence of a cohesive national framework for PD exacerbates inconsistencies in implementation and outcomes (Burns et al., 2015; World Bank, 2018).

Research on PD has highlighted the importance of tailored, context-specific training programs that address real-world challenges faced by educators (Freeman, 2002; Sims et al.,

2023). Tailored PD programs not only enhance teacher engagement but also improve the relevance and applicability of training. Constructivist Learning Theory posits that knowledge is actively constructed through social interactions and contextual experiences, underscoring the importance of collaborative and context-specific PD approaches. Freeman's KASA framework further highlights the interconnected dimensions of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness, advocating for holistic teacher development (Freeman, 2002). Kennedy (2016) emphasises the significance of collaborative models, such as professional learning communities (PLCs), which provide a platform for peer learning and mutual support. Similarly, Huijboom et al. (2021) underscore the role of reflective practices in fostering continuous improvement among educators. Social Learning Theory emphasises observational learning, imitation, and modelling, suggesting that teachers benefit from observing and interacting with peers and mentors (Bandura, 1977).

In addition, effective PD should address universal teaching principles and reflect the local context's unique cultural, social, and economic realities. Studies have highlighted the potential of integrating indigenous knowledge systems into PD programs to boost their relevance and applicability (Freeman, 2002; Ngwenya, 2021). Sims et al., 2023 suggest that culturally responsive PD programs can bridge the gap between policy and practice by addressing the unique needs of educators and learners in incorporating locally grounded strategies for classroom management and community engagement, which can help teachers navigate the challenges specific to rural schools, where traditional values and practices often influence educational outcomes (Walker, 2023). However, existing PD frameworks in Zimbabwe lack cultural responsiveness, fail to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems, and provide insufficient support for rural teachers, perpetuating disparities in education quality (Christenson & Makokoro, 2023).

Leadership training and support mechanisms are critical for the success of PD programs. Effective school leadership plays a pivotal role in creating an enabling environment for teacher development and ensuring the sustainability of PD outcomes (Burns et al., 2015). Walker (2023) highlights the importance of instructional leadership in fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional growth. They play a pivotal role in fostering an environment conducive to teacher development by setting clear goals, providing constructive feedback, and facilitating access to resources. Leadership ensures that PD initiatives are aligned with teachers' needs and school goals (Freeman, 2002). In addition, effective leadership plays a vital role in managing limited resources and ensuring equitable access to PD opportunities in optimising existing resources, securing funding, and developing partnerships to support teacher

development (Ngwenya, 2021). However, leadership capacity in Zimbabwean schools is constrained by a lack of the necessary training and resources to fulfil this role effectively, as many principals and heads of departments are ill-prepared to manage PD initiatives effectively (Christenson & Makokoro, 2023). Addressing this gap requires targeted leadership programs that equip school leaders with the skills and knowledge necessary to support their teachers and drive sustainable improvements in instructional quality. Leadership training remains an overlooked aspect of PD frameworks, limiting their overall impact.

Research on professional development consistently shows the characteristics of effective PD programs. Technology-driven PD has gained prominence in recent years as online platforms provide flexible and accessible training opportunities, enabling teachers to learn at their own pace and tailor their learning to their needs (Garet et al., 2016). However, in resource-constrained environments like Zimbabwe, the digital divide poses significant challenges to implementing technology-based PD. Rural schools, in particular, face limited access to digital infrastructure, further exacerbating disparities in professional development opportunities (Singh & Mukeredzi, 2024). Despite these advances, significant gaps remain in the design and delivery of PD in Zimbabwe. Most existing programs are short-term, focusing on immediate outcomes rather than long-term impacts on teacher retention, motivation, and student achievement. Additionally, the lack of a standardised policy framework has led to inconsistencies in PD implementation, leaving many teachers without access to high-quality training. These limitations underscore the need for a strategic rethinking of professional development to address systemic barriers and align initiatives with broader educational objectives.

While existing research provides valuable insights into effective PD practices, it often fails to address teachers' unique challenges in resource-constrained environments like Zimbabwe. Most studies are conducted in high-resource settings, limiting their applicability to low-resource contexts. Additionally, the literature often focuses on short-term outcomes, such as immediate changes in teacher practices, rather than long-term impacts on student achievement and educational quality. Furthermore, previous research has largely overlooked the systemic barriers to PD implementation, such as financial constraints, policy inconsistencies, and logistical challenges. These factors are relevant in Zimbabwe, where the education system operates under severe economic and political pressures.

Public secondary schools in Zimbabwe face several challenges in professional development; however, Bhurekeni (2020) asserts that schools must offer education in changing global economic, technological, and political paradigms. Accordingly, professional

development practices must adjust to become relevant to the new demands. Rethinking professional development in Zimbabwe's public secondary schools is imperative for addressing the systemic issues affecting education quality. This study contributes to the existing literature by addressing gaps and proposing context-sensitive strategies for professional development in Zimbabwean public secondary schools. Addressing systemic barriers and proposing sustainable solutions, the research aims to provide actionable recommendations to improve teaching effectiveness and student outcomes in a resource-constrained environment. Given this background, this study seeks to achieve the following objectives.

- To explore innovative strategies for redefining professional development in public secondary schools in Zimbabwe.
- To identify initiatives to support teacher professional development in public schools in Zimbabwe.

1.2. Research questions

The following research questions guide this study:

- What change strategies can be adopted to redefine professional development in public secondary schools in Zimbabwe?
- What support measures can be adopted to improve teacher professional development programs in public secondary schools in Zimbabwe?

1.3. Significance of the study

The study addresses a critical gap in the existing literature by focusing on Zimbabwean teachers' unique challenges in accessing and benefiting from professional development. Most existing research on PD was conducted in high-resource settings, limiting its applicability to low-resource contexts like Zimbabwe. By grounding the analysis in Zimbabwe's socioeconomic and political realities, this study provides context-sensitive insights directly relevant to the local education system. The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of PD by integrating social learning theory, constructivist approaches, and the Freeman KASA framework. This comprehensive theoretical lens thoroughly explores professional development's cognitive, social, and structural dimensions. The integration of these frameworks also emphasises the importance of collaborative learning, teacher-centred approaches, and holistic development, offering valuable insights for designing effective PD programs.

The study provides a roadmap for improving the design, implementation, and sustainability of PD programmes in public secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The study aligns with broader

global and regional goals of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and the African Union's Agenda 2063, which emphasise the importance of quality education and human capital development. By contributing to these goals, the research underscores the role of professional development in fostering sustainable educational and socioeconomic development in Zimbabwe and beyond

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative research methodology provides an in-depth, intricate and detailed understanding of meanings, actions, observable and non-observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions, and behaviours (Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015).). The interpretive paradigm emphasises understanding human experiences and perceptions within specific contexts (Cohen et al., 2018). The schools provided a context in which experiences, understanding, and meanings were described and interpreted (Creswell, 2016). The study sought to understand teachers' experiences and views of professional development in Zimbabwean public secondary schools, and the qualitative approach allowed for rich, descriptive data that captures the complexity of PD practices and their impact on teaching (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A case study approach was used to explore teacher professional development within the context of Zimbabwean public secondary schools. The case study method allowed for an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within its real-life context to understand PD's unique challenges and dynamics in Zimbabwean public secondary schools. (Yin, 2018). The case study strategy allowed for exploring PD practices across multiple schools, allowing cross-case comparisons and detailed descriptions of individual experiences.

2.2. Samples/Participants

Stratified purposive sampling was employed to select the sample for the study. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants and the documents to be analysed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014; Creswell, 2018). The research was conducted in four public secondary schools in Harare and Mashonaland West provinces, representing urban and rural settings. The four secondary schools represented diverse demographic characteristics and perspectives, ensuring that the participants directly affected by the PD programs could provide relevant insights (Creswell, 2018). Given the qualitative nature of the study, the sample consisted of 20 participants, which is considered sufficient to achieve data saturation, where no new significant information emerges from additional interviews (Sarfo, Debrah, Gbordzoe, Afful & Obeng, 2021). The study sample comprised the following:

- Four school heads (one from each selected school),
- Four heads of departments (HODs), and
- Twelve classroom teachers (three from each school).

The sample ensured the representation of stakeholders at different levels of school leadership and teaching, enabling a comprehensive understanding of PM and SHCM practices.

2.3. Instruments

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data generation tool, as they allowed for open-ended questions while allowing participants to express their views in detail. Document analysis complemented the interview data by providing insights into how PD is formally structured and implemented in Zimbabwean public secondary schools. Policy documents, school PD plans, training manuals, and evaluations were analysed to understand the official frameworks guiding PD practices.

2.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data collected during the study, a systematic method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting themes. This methodology was selected because of its inherent flexibility and capability to provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of the data. Data transcribed interviews and reviewed documents to understand the content thoroughly. Codes were identified and organised into recurring patterns and themes. Codes were later grouped into broader themes that reflected key findings. The themes are presented as thick descriptions as the findings of the study (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell, & Ranfagni, (2023).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

The findings of the study are discussed under four themes: redefining the scope and direction of professional development, rethinking teacher support systems in diverse school environments, rethinking leadership training, and introducing incentives for ongoing professional development.

Redefining the scope and direction of professional development

Participants felt there was a need to change the focus and direction of professional development in schools as teachers were at the centre of the education system, and as such, they needed continuous growth, innovation, and support to prepare students for the future. Teacher A4 said that *as a teacher, I have witnessed the challenges and the immense potential within our school. We are at the centre of the education system and live in a time when the*

global landscape is rapidly changing. The demands placed on our students and us teachers today are unlike any we have ever experienced. We must rethink how we approach professional development. We must not be mere recipients of knowledge but creators, facilitators, and the backbone of our learning. Our professional growth should not be restricted to a few training sessions. However, it must be viewed as an ongoing empowerment, collaboration, and transformation journey.

Participants also felt that professional development needed to go beyond workshops, seminars, and general teaching staff to deal with the problems teachers faced in the classroom. One teacher, C4, noted, *"Our professional development sessions must be tailored to our needs and the specific challenges we face in our classrooms. Currently, we face major challenges related to discipline and substance abuse. It is challenging to teach in some of these classes. There is a need for PD to focus on assisting with ways to deal with discipline and substance abuse.* A6 stated that *the school needs to coordinate diverse activities focused on instructional curriculum matters, as we face severe challenges in implementing the new curriculum. We need more assistance understanding and imparting the content so pupils can understand and perform better.*

Participants highlighted the need for continuous PD that is relevant to the school environment. HOD B3 stated that *schools need to facilitate' continuous professionalism that speaks to this environment of hot seating where we share resources and classes by designing a professional development plan that can be used in our schools. This process will ensure that teachers navigate this terrain of hot seating and manage courses better.* In rural settings, participants felt principals needed to coordinate more support for teachers to help them find ways to teach with few resources. D3 indicated that *a lot needs to be done to help teachers impart knowledge with minimal resources so that our learners can try to comprehend the content from their perspectives and indigenous knowledge systems. Subject meetings with other rural schools can help develop teachers in these harsh economic conditions and help them learn from each other. These subject meetings can lead to professional communities and teacher training.*

Participants also felt there was a need for PD to be comprehensive. A5 said *PD should expand beyond the basics of subject content knowledge and include pedagogical strategies, classroom management, assessment literacy, and socio-emotional learning.* C4 commented that *PD should address the cultural and socioeconomic realities of our schools and environments to ensure culturally responsive teaching blended in Indigenous knowledge systems to ensure that learning is relevant to the lives of the learners.* In addition, D4 said that

we need more control over our professional growth so that PD activities align with our own goals and the precise needs of our school.

Rethinking teacher support systems in diverse school environments

Participants felt there was a need for more support from school leaders so that teachers could ensure proper implementation of the new strategies in the classroom. Teacher C3 said *We need more support from the HODs to improve our teaching as we rarely receive follow-up support after this training. It is like these workshops are just done as per the department's requirements.* On the same note, Teacher A5 said *that more effective supervision needs to be done so that we receive the required constructive feedback to improve our teaching practices.* In school D, teachers expressed that the absence of supervision affected the induction of new teachers and that the teachers may have lacked access to mentorship opportunities, which hindered their development and adaptation to the teaching environment. *Teacher D2 said it was tough when I started teaching; no one helped me or checked if I was doing the right thing. The HODs and the Principals were busy with their work. I was frustrated and felt isolated, which negatively affected my performance during my first year of teaching. There is a need for more supervision and mentorship for new teachers to provide them with guidance, support, and encouragement, helping them to navigate the challenges of rural life and conditions.*

Participants called for more psychological support to navigate challenges initiated by the stressful economic environment and remain focused on their work. D2 noted *a serious lack of mentorship and support systems for new teachers in our schools, making it difficult for some to adapt and thrive in their roles. There is a need for more mental and psychological support to help us pull through the pressures of living and working in a rural environment.* B3 stated *that the economic environment we work in is terrible and stressful, and we need psychological support to navigate this terrain so that we can focus on our work. Our hot seating environment here, where we share classes and resources, requires much understanding to make it work. The pressure of working in shifts disrupts our average working balance and affects us, resulting in burnout. There is a need for leadership to allocate specific planning periods or use shared planning sessions where multiple teachers collaborate on lesson plans to help them manage the workload. I believe introducing short meetings every day before lessons is important to support each other.* Another teacher, D4, added *that the working conditions are harsh, especially in rural areas. We lack primary resources and support, making staying motivated difficult.* In addition, he said *that management must find creative ways to conduct induction and mentoring programs in schools without looking for funds for these programs.*

Rethinking leadership training

The study found that participants felt a need to rethink leadership training in Zimbabwean schools as many principals lacked adequate training in professional development, which hindered their ability to support and develop their staff. One teacher, D3, stated that *principals are expected to manage and develop us as teachers but have not been trained in these areas. There is a need for better training of principals to provide them with knowledge and support when we lack the expertise and resources.* Teacher respondent B7 furthermore said that *training principals and HODs would help improve their supervision and management skills to monitor instruction effectively.* B6 added that *school leadership is involved in supervision. Supervisors must be trained continuously to coach and mentor their subordinates to produce good results through systematic coaching and mentoring.* C5 stated that *leaders need skills in conducting classroom observations and providing constructive feedback to help us improve our performance.* C4 also commented that *we need training on fully utilising the performance management system and engaging the necessary resources to meet set goals and objectives.*

Participants also felt there was a need to rethink leadership training for professional development as this was essential for addressing the challenges faced by teachers in public secondary schools in Zimbabwe. B4 said that *our classes are overcrowded and have limited resources, coupled with these curriculum changes. Effective leadership from school heads is critical in providing emotional and professional support.* D5 said *school heads in rural schools should receive training in leadership, staff motivation, and conflict resolution to foster a positive work environment.* D3 said *our school faces challenges of poor infrastructure and a lack of resources. Therefore, leadership training should equip our leaders to develop strategies to manage these challenges and promote professional growth for us teachers.*

Incentives for PD.

The study found that participants felt there was a need for schools to offer incentives to teachers to participate in PD programs as the low salaries, poor working conditions, and limited career advancement opportunities led to low motivation and a lack of interest in professional development programs. One teacher, B3, explained, *"The salary we receive is not enough to sustain us, and there are no clear pathways for career advancement. The principal wants us to attend PD when our session ends, but we can not. Anything that does not bring money to the table, we can not do. If they offer us something to attend those sessions, we can attend.* Similarly, B6 felt that *if the school could introduce bonuses for completing PD programs, it could motivate teachers to participate in PD.*

3.2. Discussion

The study explored professional development in public secondary schools, and the findings underscore the need to rethink and redefine professional development in Zimbabwean public secondary schools. The findings highlight critical gaps in the current practices, demonstrating the necessity for a comprehensive restructuring of professional development. These changes are necessary to drive meaningful development in Zimbabwean secondary schools in challenging economic and political conditions.

Redefining the Scope and Direction of PD

All participants called for a rethink of the scope and direction of PD in Zimbabwe. The findings underscore the need for a redefined, flexible, and responsive approach to professional development that positions teachers as active collaborators in their growth, addresses real classroom challenges, and recognises the diverse contexts in which they teach. Implementing these recommendations could lead to a more effective and meaningful professional development experience, ultimately benefiting educators and students. The recognition of teachers as the backbone of the education system aligns with the concept of teacher agency, which posits that teachers are not merely implementers of policies but active agents of change within their contexts (Priestley et al. (2015). This shift in perspective is supported by empirical studies highlighting how teacher empowerment contributes to student outcomes (Biesta, 2017).

Participants felt that PD should be tailored to their specific needs and the context of their schools and aligned with school goals. The call for PD programs to consider the particular contexts in which teachers work correlates with the concepts of cultural responsiveness, highlighting the importance of acknowledging students' diverse backgrounds, particularly in under-resourced areas (Freeman, 2002). In rural settings, studies have demonstrated that tailored professional communities can lead to enhanced collaboration among teachers and improved educational outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Participants advocated for a holistic view of PD, including various teaching dimensions. The finding illustrates the complexity of teaching and underscores the interdependence of pedagogical strategies, classroom management, and socio-emotional learning (Danielson, 2013). The KASA framework assumes that PD programs address knowledge acquisition, skills development, and attitudinal shifts necessary for effective teaching. The study also highlighted the need for culturally responsive PD that integrates indigenous knowledge systems and addresses the socioeconomic realities of Zimbabwean learners. The finding reflects global trends toward decolonising education and making it more relevant to local contexts (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018).

The gap between teachers' professional needs and the content of PD reflects a disconnect between policy and practice, a common theme in empirical studies on education in

resource-constrained environments (Ofundo, 2019). The empirical evidence in the study shows dissatisfaction among teachers who feel that PD programs are irrelevant to their everyday challenges, such as discipline issues, substance abuse, and adapting to new curricula. This finding resonates with constructivist approaches that advocate and emphasise the importance of contextual relevance in TPD (Vygotsky, 1978; Dewey, 1933). The literature suggests that school-based training can significantly enhance teachers' ability to integrate new strategies into their practice (Bett, 2016). To rethink PD, it is essential to design highly contextualised programmes responsive to the realities of the teaching environment in Zimbabwean secondary schools. Teachers at School C expressed a need for PD that addresses classroom discipline and substance abuse. A rethinking of PD would involve designing PD focused on behaviour management strategies that align with the cultural and socioeconomic context of Zimbabwean schools.

The findings highlight a strong desire for teacher collaboration and interaction, mainly through subject meetings and coordination with other schools. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) provide a valuable solution to teachers' isolation, especially in rural areas, by encouraging collaborative learning and sharing best practices (Mugwaze, 2022). Establishing PLCs within schools and across districts is essential, allowing teachers to work together, share experiences, and jointly address specific classroom challenges. Redefining professional development requires the establishment of structured PLCs where teachers can regularly meet to discuss curriculum challenges, share teaching resources, and collaboratively tackle classroom problems.

Rethinking Teacher Support Systems in Diverse School Environments

The findings highlighted the need for better support systems for teachers in diverse school environments. Participants expressed frustration over the lack of supervision, mentorship, and psychological support. Teachers indicated a need for ongoing professional development and access to mentorship and supervision. The literature emphasises the importance of support structures in PD post-training support, such as coaching, for teachers to implement new practices effectively (Sims et al., 2023). Constructivist learning theory posits that knowledge is constructed through interactions and experiences. The participants' call for more effective supervision aligns with the constructivist approach, which emphasises the importance of social interactions in learning. Teacher A5's desire for constructive feedback highlighted the need for ongoing dialogue and reflection in professional development. Teachers develop more robust teaching practices when they engage in collaborative environments where shared experiences contribute to learning. Social Learning Theory stresses the significance of observational learning, imitation, and modelling in developing behaviour. The voices of the

teachers revealed the lack of supervision and mentorship, creating a void where new teachers missed opportunities to observe and learn from seasoned colleagues. Teacher D2's experience of feeling isolated highlights how important it is for new teachers to witness effective teaching strategies in practice. This underscores a communal aspect of teacher development where learning from peers can foster resilience and adaptability, particularly in challenging rural settings.

Participants called for psychological support, reflecting the pressing need for mental health resources in schools, especially in rural areas where teachers face economic and emotional strain. Teachers' emotional well-being is critical, and addressing these attitudes through psychological support and mentorship can foster a more positive outlook on teaching, as teacher well-being affects student outcomes (Freeman, 2002). The KASA Framework emphasises the importance of emotional support in fostering positive attitudes toward professional development (Freeman, 2002). Empirical studies by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) highlight the need for continuous, collaborative support systems to help teachers navigate challenges and sustain their professional growth. The absence of such systems, as reported by participants, mirrors the findings of the World Bank (2018), which identified inadequate PD support as a barrier to improving teacher performance in low-resource environments.

In conclusion, the findings indicate a pressing need for systemic changes in how teachers are supported in diverse environments, particularly in rural settings. By addressing leadership support, mentorship for new teachers, psychological well-being, collaboration, resource allocation, and innovative solutions for program implementation, schools can create a more conducive environment for teacher growth and student success.

Rethinking Leadership Training

Participants highlighted the need to rethink leadership training for school principals and heads of departments (HODs), citing the lack of adequate training in PD management and support. Most participants emphasised the importance of ongoing training for school leaders. They pointed out that principals and heads of departments (HODs) needed to improve their supervision and management skills to monitor instruction effectively. Continuous development in these areas would enable them to provide better coaching and mentorship, which are critical for improving teaching outcomes. Participants' calls for leadership training echo Freeman's KASA Framework, which highlights the need for leaders to possess content knowledge and the skills to mentor and support teachers, especially in rural schools, where leaders face additional challenges due to limited resources and infrastructure.

The findings are consistent with the literature, which stresses the importance of instructional leadership in effective PD implementation. Burns et al. (2015) argue that school leaders are instrumental in creating a conducive environment for teacher professional development by providing ongoing feedback and support. Social Learning Theory also emphasises the importance of leadership in modelling effective practices, as teachers are more likely to adopt new strategies when they observe their leaders actively supporting PD initiatives (Bandura, 1977). Research by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) demonstrated that effective leadership is crucial for sustaining collaborative learning communities among teachers; however, the study found that school leaders were inadequately trained to support the overall effectiveness of PD programs.

Incentives for Professional Development

The study found that teachers lack the motivation to participate in PD due to inadequate financial incentives and poor working conditions. Poor working conditions, low salaries, and a lack of career advancement opportunities affect their motivation to engage in PD activities. Teachers expressed that financial incentives could encourage attendance at these sessions, reflecting findings from empirical studies indicating that motivation is closely linked to compensation and career advancement opportunities (Mitchell et al., 2024). This finding also aligns with the literature on teacher motivation, highlighting extrinsic rewards' role in enhancing engagement with PD activities (Sims et al., 2023). Numerous studies have shown that financial incentives can enhance teacher motivation and engagement in PD. Participation rates significantly increased when schools implemented incentives such as bonuses for attending PD, leading to improved instructional practices.

The findings from this study highlight the urgent need for reform in Teacher Professional Development (PD) initiatives within Zimbabwe's public secondary schools. By addressing the specific needs of teachers through tailored programs, improving support systems, providing training for school leaders, offering incentives for participation, and facilitating continuous professional development opportunities, schools can foster an environment that promotes teacher growth and improves educational outcomes. Effective PD can enhance teacher motivation, effectiveness, and retention by focusing on relevance, leadership training, ongoing learning, incentives, emotional support, and supervision, even in challenging economic and political conditions. For PD to have a lasting impact on teaching practices and student outcomes, teachers must feel that it addresses their real needs, supports their professional growth, and is valued by school leadership.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the pressing need to rethink and redefine teacher professional development (PD) in Zimbabwe's public secondary schools. The findings revealed significant gaps in the current PD structure, demonstrating how economic constraints, policy gaps, and limited leadership support have contributed to existing programs' ineffectiveness. Teachers in Zimbabwe face unique challenges that demand a contextual, flexible, and continuous approach to PD, responsive to their everyday classroom needs, socioeconomic realities, and the specific demands of their communities. The article highlighted the importance of moving beyond traditional PD approaches toward a model that empowers teachers as active participants in their professional growth. Key recommendations include developing context-specific PD programs, enhancing leadership training for principals, and creating supportive frameworks for ongoing mentorship and collaboration.

Additionally, implementing incentives could motivate teachers to engage more deeply in PD, thus fostering a culture of professional growth that can positively influence teaching practices and student outcomes. By addressing these critical areas, Zimbabwe's education system can strengthen teacher effectiveness, support retention, and improve student learning experiences and achievement. Rethinking professional development in public secondary schools in Zimbabwe requires a holistic and innovative approach to addressing local challenges, promoting continuous learning, leveraging technology, and aligning with strategic goals. Professional development can be transformed into a powerful tool for improving teacher quality and student outcomes. Ensuring that professional development is sustainable, flexible, and teacher-centred will contribute to the overall success of Zimbabwe's education system. Through these efforts, Zimbabwe can build a stronger, more capable teaching workforce equipped to meet the challenges of this generation. The study augments the discourse on PD in resource-limited contexts. It provides a framework for policymakers, school leaders, and educators to collaborate and work towards a sustainable and impactful professional development strategy tailored to Zimbabwe's unique challenges.

4.2. Suggestions

The findings of this study have several implications for policy and practice in Zimbabwean public secondary schools.

- Policymakers and educational stakeholders should design context-sensitive PD programs that address teachers' unique challenges in Zimbabwean public secondary schools. These programs must integrate indigenous knowledge systems, socio-

emotional learning, and practical strategies for managing classroom challenges such as discipline and substance abuse.

- Schools should establish robust support systems, including mentorship programs, regular supervision, and psychological resources. These measures will ensure teachers receive the guidance and emotional support needed to navigate challenging work environments, particularly in rural areas.
- Continuous training for principals and department heads is essential to equip them with the skills to effectively support and mentor teachers, manage resources, and foster a culture of collaboration. Leadership training should emphasise instructional leadership, staff motivation, and resource management.
- Financial and non-financial incentives, such as bonuses, career advancement opportunities, and recognition, should be implemented to motivate teachers to engage in PD programs. These measures can help overcome barriers related to low morale and economic hardship.
- Schools should establish Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and facilitate regular subject meetings to encourage collaboration and peer learning. These platforms will enable teachers to share experiences, address common challenges, and enhance professional growth collectively.
- The Ministry of Education should prioritise funding for PD initiatives, particularly in rural and under-resourced schools. Policies should focus on ensuring equitable access to PD opportunities and addressing logistical challenges such as transportation and technological barriers.
- Further studies should examine the long-term impact of context-sensitive PD programs on teacher performance and student outcomes. Research should also explore innovative ways to integrate digital tools and technology into PD programs to enhance accessibility and effectiveness.

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