

Article history:

Received 11 January 2024

Revised 07 March 2024

Accepted 17 March 2024

Published online 01 May 2024

Professional Development Needs of Teachers in Rural Schools

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Şahin, A., Soylu, D., Jafari, M.B. (2024). Professional Development Needs of Teachers in Rural Schools. *Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology*, 7(1), 219-225. <http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.ijes.7.1.22>



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to explore the professional development needs of rural teachers to identify targeted strategies that can enhance their professional growth and effectiveness.

Methodology: This qualitative study involved 31 rural teachers, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather data. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo software to ensure thematic accuracy and depth. Theoretical saturation was achieved to ensure comprehensive coverage of the topics discussed. The study's approach was grounded in qualitative methodologies, with an emphasis on capturing the lived experiences and insights of the participants.

Findings: Four main themes were identified: Access to Resources, Professional Growth, Challenges and Barriers, and Suggested Improvements. Access to Resources highlighted issues like unreliable internet and inadequate professional materials. Professional Growth focused on the importance of collaborative learning and skill development. Challenges and Barriers included financial and geographic constraints, while Suggested Improvements called for policy reforms, infrastructure development, and community engagement to support rural teachers. **Conclusion:** The study highlights the complex challenges rural teachers face in accessing and benefiting from professional development opportunities. It suggests that tailored interventions are necessary to address these unique needs effectively. By focusing on specific improvements such as enhanced infrastructure, policy support, and community involvement, stakeholders can significantly impact the professional lives of rural teachers.

Keywords: Rural education, teacher professional development, qualitative research, educational challenges, educational policy, community involvement.

1. Introduction

Rural education represents unique challenges and opportunities for teacher professional development. Teachers in rural areas often encounter issues related to geographic isolation, limited access to resources, and specific community cultural dynamics, all of which impact their professional growth and effectiveness. As education systems worldwide strive to improve teacher quality, understanding the specific needs and contexts of rural educators becomes paramount (Akintolu & Uleanya, 2021; Allen et al., 2022; Berry et al., 2011; Eghbal et al., 2020; Leinsalu et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2022; Quinn et al., 2020; Setyadharma et al., 2021).

Rural teachers frequently experience barriers that differ significantly from their urban counterparts. Monk (2007) underscores the difficulties in recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers in rural districts, attributing these challenges partly to remote locations and fewer professional development opportunities (Monk, 2007). These issues are compounded by the limited access to collaborative and continuing education opportunities, which are more readily available in more densely populated areas (Berry, 2012; Berry et al., 2011). Furthermore, the retention of these teachers is often hampered by a lack of support and professional isolation (Luo et al., 2022).

Professional development programs tailored to rural settings are crucial for enhancing teacher effectiveness and student outcomes. Quinn et al. (2020) discuss the potential of online technologies to meet the professional learning development (PLD) needs of rural teachers, suggesting that digital platforms can bridge the gap in access to content and collaborative learning opportunities (Quinn et al., 2020). However, implementing technology-based solutions requires addressing the digital divide that still exists in many rural areas, where Internet access may be unreliable or insufficient (Berry, 2012).

In addition to technological solutions, the nature of professional collaboration in rural schools also plays a critical role in the development of teaching skills. Pettersson and Ström (2019) highlight the importance of professional collaboration between class teachers and special educators in Swedish rural schools, suggesting that such interactions can significantly enhance instructional strategies and support inclusive education (Henry, 2019). This viewpoint aligns with Henry (2019), who emphasizes the need for identifying and allocating resources strategically to improve learning in rural settings (Henry, 2019).

The emotional and psychological well-being of rural teachers also impacts their professional longevity and effectiveness. Heeralal (2014) points out the personal challenges that rural teachers face, including professional isolation, which can lead to decreased job satisfaction and increased turnover rates. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies that consider both the professional and personal needs of teachers (Heeralal, 2014).

Emerging technologies offer new avenues for addressing these longstanding issues. Chen et al. (2022) explore the use of telepresence robots to facilitate remote access to professional development resources, like makerspaces, which can provide rural teachers with hands-on experiences and training opportunities otherwise unavailable in their immediate environments (Chen et al., 2022). Similarly, Soekamto et al. (2022) discuss the significance of digital literacy in the professional development of rural teachers, advocating for training that enhances teachers' ability to integrate digital tools into their teaching practices effectively (Soekamto et al., 2022).

Given the complex interplay of challenges and opportunities in rural education, this study aims to delve deeply into the professional development needs of rural teachers through qualitative analysis. By focusing on their specific contexts and leveraging both traditional and innovative approaches, this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on enhancing educational outcomes in rural areas through targeted teacher support and development initiatives.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study was designed to explore the professional development needs of teachers in rural schools. Given the depth and complexity inherent in understanding these needs, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable for capturing detailed insights and nuances. The primary method of data collection involved semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in responses while ensuring consistency across interviews.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to include teachers from various rural schools who have diverse experiences and backgrounds in professional development. The sample size was guided by the principle of theoretical saturation, where data collection continued until no new relevant information was generated through additional interviews.

All participants were provided with a consent form outlining the study's purpose, their role in it, and the handling of their data, emphasizing confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structure Interview

The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes each. The interview guide was carefully crafted to explore several key areas, including current professional development activities, perceived gaps in knowledge and skills, challenges faced in accessing professional development resources, and suggestions for improving professional development offerings in rural contexts. Interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants to ensure accuracy in data capture.

2.3. Data Analysis

Transcripts from the interviews were analyzed using NVivo software, which facilitated efficient management and organization of the data. A thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the

data. This involved a rigorous process of coding in an iterative manner to refine and categorize themes. The researcher remained engaged in a constant comparative method to compare elements across different data sets to refine the sub-themes and ensure comprehensive theme development.

3. Findings and Results

The study involved 31 participants, all of whom were teachers in rural schools across several regions. The demographic profile of the participants included 19 females and 12 males, reflecting a diverse gender balance. The age of the participants ranged from 25 to 59 years, with a median age of 42. In terms of experience, participants varied widely, with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 35 years. The majority (58%) had over 10 years of teaching experience, indicating a high level of professional maturity and insight into the educational needs specific to rural settings. The educational background of the participants was also diverse; however, all had attained at least a bachelor's degree in education, and 13 of them (approximately 42%) had further qualifications at the master's level or higher, underscoring a strong commitment to personal and professional development within the field of education.

Table 1

Categories, Subcategories, and Concepts

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
Access to Resources	Internet Connectivity	Unreliable connections, High costs, Limited bandwidth, Rural-urban disparity
	Professional Development Materials	Inadequate supplies, Outdated materials, Lack of subject-specific resources
	Training Opportunities	Distance to training centers, Frequency of workshops, Online vs. in-person
Professional Growth	Collaborative Learning	Peer learning groups, Inter-school networks, Mentorship programs
	Career Advancement	Promotion opportunities, Leadership training, Recognition and incentives
	Skill Development	Technology integration, Classroom management, Curriculum planning
	Self-Directed Learning	Access to online courses, Time management, Self-motivation
Challenges and Barriers	Financial Constraints	Budget limitations, Funding cuts, Cost of continuous education
	Time Constraints	Scheduling conflicts, Balancing work and training, Lack of paid leave
	Geographic Isolation	Remote location, Limited peer interaction, Transport issues
	Cultural Barriers	Community expectations, Language barriers, Resistance to change
Suggested Improvements	Policy Reforms	Government support, Policy on rural education, Incentives for rural teachers
	Infrastructure Development	Building resources, Technology upgrades, Transport facilities
	Tailored Professional Development	Needs-based training, Role-specific workshops, Seasonal scheduling
	Community Engagement	Parental involvement, Community learning events, Local resource utilization

3.1. Access to Resources

This theme encapsulates the physical and digital resources necessary for professional development. Internet

Connectivity emerged as a significant barrier, with one teacher noting, "We often face unreliable connections which severely impact our ability to participate in online training sessions." Professional Development Materials are another concern; a participant mentioned, "The materials we receive

are often outdated and don't meet our current teaching needs." Regarding Training Opportunities, a teacher explained, "Most training centers are too far, and traveling there frequently isn't feasible."

3.2. Professional Growth

Professional growth was frequently discussed, emphasizing Collaborative Learning, where a teacher highlighted, "Peer learning groups have been vital for sharing resources and teaching strategies." In terms of Career Advancement, a participant stated, "There's little in the way of advancement unless you're willing to move to a larger town." Skill Development was seen as crucial, with comments like, "Integrating technology into our teaching is now essential, but many of us lack the training to do so effectively." Self-Directed Learning also surfaced as a vital subtheme, with a teacher admitting, "Finding time for online courses is tough, but it's the only way to advance at my own pace."

3.3. Challenges and Barriers

Participants frequently cited Financial Constraints as a significant hurdle: "Budget cuts have made it almost impossible to pursue further qualifications." Time Constraints were also problematic, with one educator noting, "I often have to choose between preparing for my classes or attending training." Geographic Isolation affects many rural teachers; one said, "Our remote location limits our access to face-to-face training opportunities." Cultural Barriers can also impede progress; as one teacher reflected, "There's a lot of resistance within the community towards new educational approaches."

3.4. Suggested Improvements

For Policy Reforms, teachers suggested more robust support from authorities, with one stating, "We need policies that specifically address the challenges of rural teaching." In Infrastructure Development, a participant noted, "Upgraded technology and better transport facilities would make a huge difference." Regarding Tailored Professional Development, it was mentioned, "Workshops that consider our specific conditions and roles are essential for our professional growth." Lastly, Community Engagement was seen as beneficial, with comments such as, "Greater involvement of the community in school activities could enhance learning outcomes and support for our initiatives."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, four main themes were identified to understand the professional development needs of rural teachers: Access to Resources, Professional Growth, Challenges and Barriers, and Suggested Improvements. Each theme encompasses a set of categories that detail specific aspects of the overarching theme. For Access to Resources, the categories included Internet Connectivity, Professional Development Materials, and Training Opportunities. Professional Growth was broken down into Collaborative Learning, Career Advancement, Skill Development, and Self-Directed Learning. Challenges and Barriers comprised Financial Constraints, Time Constraints, Geographic Isolation, and Cultural Barriers. Lastly, Suggested Improvements were categorized into Policy Reforms, Infrastructure Development, Tailored Professional Development, and Community Engagement.

The theme of Access to Resources revealed significant obstacles in Internet Connectivity, where concepts such as unreliable connections and high costs were prevalent. Professional Development Materials also emerged as a category, characterized by inadequate and outdated resources. Training Opportunities further highlighted the logistical challenges faced by rural teachers, including the infrequency of workshops and the problematic distances teachers must travel to attend training, emphasizing a disparity in access compared to their urban counterparts.

Under the theme of Professional Growth, Collaborative Learning was highlighted as essential, with teachers valuing peer learning groups and inter-school networks for sharing resources and strategies. Career Advancement revealed a concern over limited promotion opportunities and the need for more leadership training. Skill Development was identified as crucial, with a focus on integrating technology, enhancing classroom management, and refining curriculum planning. Self-Directed Learning indicated a strong interest among teachers in pursuing online courses and developing time management skills to facilitate personal and professional growth.

Challenges and Barriers included Financial Constraints, where teachers noted budget limitations and funding cuts impacting their ability to participate in professional development. Time Constraints were also significant, with teachers reporting conflicts between their teaching responsibilities and opportunities for professional development. Geographic Isolation was particularly problematic, as it limited face-to-face training and peer

interaction. Cultural Barriers also surfaced, reflecting resistance within communities to new educational approaches and the impact of language barriers on teacher and student engagement.

For Suggested Improvements, teachers advocated for Policy Reforms that would provide more governmental support and recognition of the unique challenges faced in rural areas. Infrastructure Development was suggested to improve access to resources and training facilities. Tailored Professional Development was a recurring theme, with calls for programs that specifically address the roles and situations of rural teachers. Finally, Community Engagement was seen as a means to increase support for schools by involving parents and local stakeholders more actively in educational processes and decision-making.

A primary finding of this study was the significant challenge rural teachers face in accessing necessary resources, including reliable internet and professional development materials. These findings align closely with Berry (2012), who reported similar challenges regarding internet connectivity and access to digital resources (Berry, 2012). The implication is clear: without robust infrastructure, the effectiveness of any online or technologically supported professional development initiatives remains limited. This underscores the arguments made by Quinn et al. (2020), who suggest that while online technologies hold potential for meeting the professional development needs of rural teachers, their success is contingent on the underlying digital infrastructure (Quinn et al., 2020).

The theme of professional growth, particularly through collaborative learning and skill development, emerged strongly in the interviews. This reflects the observations of Pettersson and Ström (2019), who noted the importance of professional collaboration in enhancing teaching practices in rural settings (Pettersson & Ström, 2019). The current study extends this understanding by illustrating the diverse forms of collaboration that rural teachers value, such as peer learning groups and inter-school networks. Such collaborative approaches not only mitigate professional isolation but also enhance ongoing learning and sharing of best practices, which Monk (2007) identified as crucial for retaining high-quality teachers in rural areas (Monk, 2007).

Financial constraints, time constraints, and geographic isolation were highlighted as significant barriers to accessing and participating in professional development. These findings are in line with the work of Luo et al. (2022), who emphasized similar barriers, particularly the impact of

geographic isolation on professional engagement and development opportunities (Luo et al., 2022). Furthermore, the cultural barriers identified in this study echo the concerns raised by Heeralal (2014), who discussed the broader community and cultural factors that affect rural teachers' professional lives and their capacity to engage in development activities (Heeralal, 2014).

The participants suggested several improvements, including policy reforms and infrastructure development, which could address many of the identified challenges. These suggestions resonate with the recommendations of Zimmerle and Lambert (2019), who advocate for globally connected learning networks that can provide rural teachers with access to wider resources and communities (Zimmerle & Lambert, 2019). Moreover, the call for tailored professional development programs aligns with Henry (2019), who argues for the strategic allocation of resources that are specifically designed to meet the unique needs of rural educators (Henry, 2019).

This study identified four main themes relevant to the professional development needs of rural teachers: Access to Resources, Professional Growth, Challenges and Barriers, and Suggested Improvements. Access to Resources highlighted issues such as unreliable internet connectivity, inadequate professional development materials, and limited training opportunities. Professional Growth emphasized the importance of collaborative learning, career advancement opportunities, skill development, and self-directed learning. Challenges and Barriers revealed significant obstacles such as financial constraints, time constraints, geographic isolation, and cultural barriers. Finally, Suggested Improvements included recommendations for policy reforms, infrastructure development, tailored professional development programs, and enhanced community engagement.

The findings from this study underscore the complex interplay of challenges and opportunities that shape the professional development landscape for rural teachers. By identifying specific needs and barriers, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how to support and enhance the professional growth of educators in these unique contexts. The suggested improvements offer actionable insights that policymakers, administrators, and educators can implement to address the identified gaps and foster a more supportive environment for rural teachers.

This study is limited by its qualitative nature and the relatively small sample size, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of rural teachers across different

regions or countries. Additionally, the reliance on semi-structured interviews, while valuable for in-depth insights, might omit broader systemic factors that could be captured through other data collection methods such as surveys or observational studies.

Future research should consider expanding the participant base to include a wider geographic area to capture more diverse perspectives within the rural teaching context. Quantitative studies could be employed to validate the themes identified in this qualitative study and to measure the prevalence and impact of the various challenges and improvements suggested. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide insights into how professional development needs evolve over time as educational policies and technologies change.

The findings from this study have practical implications for educational stakeholders aiming to enhance teacher effectiveness in rural settings. School administrators and policymakers should consider investing in robust internet infrastructure and providing rural teachers with more accessible, high-quality professional development materials. Tailoring professional development programs to the specific needs of rural educators and promoting policies that facilitate easier access to training and collaborative opportunities are essential. Furthermore, engaging the local community in the educational process could help mitigate cultural barriers and enhance the support network for rural teachers. These actions are crucial for creating an equitable and effective educational environment across all geographical areas.

Authors' Contributions

In this study, the authors collectively were responsible for data collection, analysis, and manuscript writing.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

This study acknowledged all those who contributed to its completion.

Declaration of Interest

No conflict of interest was reported.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical principles such as confidentiality and voluntary participation.

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