

Toward a New Model for Teacher Retention: The Case of Public Primary School Teachers in Rural Liberia

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Cite this article in APA

Lan, C. Z., Kitur, J. K., & Mbogo, R. (2025). Toward a new model for teacher retention: The case of public primary school teachers in rural Liberia. *Journal of education management and leadership*, 4(1), 33-45. <https://doi.org/10.51317/jeml.v4i1.732>

 OPEN ACCESS
A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history

Received: 2025-03-21
Accepted: 2025-04-20
Published: 2025-05-22

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the reasons why public teachers abandon their positions in rural communities in rural Liberia and to design strategies to improve retention. The study employed a qualitative case study design to gather insights from District Education Officers, principals, and current and former teachers through focus group discussions and ten individual interviews. The data for this study were analysed in analytical circles using the spiral approach. The study revealed that factors contributing to teacher turnover are complex, including personal, infrastructural, systematic governmental, and cultural, while factors enhancing teachers' retention include community support for teachers, supportive and open school leadership, and prestige for the profession. Finally, a model to improve teacher retention is suggested by integrating the findings with adaptive leadership theories and the community of practices, with practical suggestions for the implementation of the new model.

Key terms: Adaptive leadership, community of practices, retention, rural community, turnover factors.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher shortages is a major problem facing education in the world. Teacher shortage is the inadequate supply of teachers in relation to student enrolment (Sutcher et al., 2019). Teacher shortages directly impact the quality of education and public assurance in education. Schools that are faced with teacher shortages lower recruitment standards, hire low-quality teachers, and increase class sizes or reduce class offerings (National Education Association, 2022; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Greufe, 2020; Menzies, 2023). These result in poor learning achievements for students, increased dropouts, and decreased public confidence in the education system (Murlidhar, 2019; Mupa & Chinooneka, 2015; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Educators for Excellence, 2024).

Educators and policymakers have endeavoured to address the situation of teacher shortages by pouring more teachers into the classrooms. Teacher shortages are not primarily due to the overall deficit of teachers, but to turnover, more teachers leaving the profession before retirement for different reasons (Tran et al., 2022; Desiree et al., 2022; Ingersoll, 2001). Given that teacher shortages are not only caused by overall shortages of qualified teachers, pouring more teachers into the classrooms cannot effectively solve the problem of teacher shortages. Solving the teacher shortage crisis effectively will require investigating and understanding the contributors to the problem of teacher shortages, which often differ across regions, countries, and within communities.

This study investigated the factors that affect the turnover of public primary school teachers in rural Liberia. The study then integrated the findings of existing teacher turnover and leadership theories and proposed a new model to improve teacher retention in rural communities, with recommendations for the implementation of the new model in rural communities in Liberia and beyond.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher Turnover in Rural Communities

Teacher turnover is higher in rural communities, and the contributors to turnover are different, posing major challenges to instruction in rural communities. (Williams et al., 2021) Conducted research on race, climate, and turnover in rural Georgia. The investigation used administrative records and unique climate survey data to establish that the intersecting roles of race, money, and school climate shape evolving teacher turnover patterns in rural schools. The investigation revealed a higher turnover among Black rural schools among Black teachers. Salaries and school climate are drivers of teacher turnover decisions (Williams et al., 2021).

Monk (2007) investigated the retention and recruitment of teachers in rural communities.

The study indicated a higher turnover rate among teachers in rural communities as well as difficulty in replacing vacancies in rural communities arising from turnover. Additionally, the investigation revealed highly untrained teachers in rural communities. Some challenges linked to teacher turnover in rural areas have been identified, including the lack of modern telecommunication and computing technologies for teachers (Monk, 2007). Santos and Miguel (2019) investigated the turnover, Murlidhar, and retention of teachers in rural schools in Archipelagic Countries.

The study employed interpretative and phenomenological analyses to understand teacher turnover situations with a sample size of six international school teachers. The study revealed that managerial styles, negative leadership, and limited social networking were the key contributors to teacher turnover, while

factors enhancing teacher turnover included respectfulness and a simple living style (Miguel & Santos, 2019).

These studies have revealed that teacher turnover is a significant challenge facing rural schools globally. Teacher turnover was higher in rural communities than in urban schools. Factors found to contribute to teacher turnover in rural communities included poor leadership support for teachers, remote environment of schools, lack of telecommunication and computing technologies, poor leadership support for teachers, poor connection to school communities, and student behavior. Factors contributing to the retention of teachers include cordial relationships with the community and respect for the teaching profession (Monk, 2007; Santos & Miguel, 2019; Williams et al., 2021). Schools facing teacher turnover struggle to hire teachers to fill the vacancies created as a result of teachers leaving the schools. The necessity to find replacements for teachers who have left the classrooms can result in school administrators hiring underqualified and inexperienced teachers, which can negatively impact the quality of instruction received by learners.

Impact of Teacher Turnover on Schools

Teacher turnover creates educational, economic, and human rights concerns. Teacher turnover disrupts school operations, shared relationships, collaboration among stakeholders, and organisational knowledge (McKenna, 2018; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). These compromises schools' abilities to provide quality education to students and weaken the educational system's capacities to prepare next generation of workers adequately, which limits national economic productivity (Southern Regional Education Board, 2022). Moreover, turnover creates knowledge and education gaps between urban and rural communities, creating regional inequality (UNESCO, 2017). To transform society and decrease inequality, education must be transformed, beginning with teacher employment conditions (International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

The foundation of the theoretical framework for this study is derived from Mason and Matas's (2015) four-capital theoretical model for teacher retention. Mason and Matas's (2015) four-capital theoretical model suggests that teacher turnover is a complex phenomenon resulting from interactions among elements from four non-economic capitals: social, human, positive psychological, and structural. As such, there is no single effective solution to addressing teacher turnover. Solving the teacher turnover situation would require identifying and addressing the contributing factors.

Mason and Matas (2015) employed qualitative thematic content analysis methodology and examined teacher attrition and retention factors in Australia by reviewing research on teacher attrition in Australia from 1995 to 2014. The authors generated major factors that contributed to teachers' attrition and retention and explained them using four existing non-economic theories. The studies categorised the themes using principles of the existing non-capital theories and proposed a new four-capital theoretical model for teacher retention. The model suggests that to retain teachers, practitioners have to determine and address the underlying factors.

Mason and Matas's (2015) four-capital theoretical model of teacher retention concurred with Ingersoll's (2001) organisation phenomenon theory, which suggests that teacher turnover is a complex phenomenon and requires identifying and addressing underlying assumptions. Ingersoll examined national teacher

administration data in America in between 1990 and 1992. The analysis showed that structural factors like school leadership styles, administrative procedures, teacher collaborations, and student characters, are impactful on teacher turnover decisions. Hence, teacher turnover cannot be effectively addressed without a thorough examination of the complex dimensions (Ingersoll, 2001).

Rao and Casey (2024) employed an exploratory qualitative study of teacher preparation programs using interviews, surveys, and focus groups, and found a strong prevalence of the four capitals as competing and intersecting phenomena aiding in understanding teacher turnover and retention. The investigation revealed that the four capitals—human, social, structural, and positive psychological—significantly impact teacher retention or attrition.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to gather insights from District Education Officers, principals, and current and former teachers. Purposeful sampling method was suitable for this study to select participants who informed us of the problem of teacher turnover and attrition within the county. The type of purposeful sampling employed was maximum variation. A total of 12 District Education Officers and principals, along with 12 teachers, served as the sample for the study, as shown in the table below:

Table 1: Sample Size, Selection Criteria and Target Population

Category	Size	Target	Selection Criteria	Sampling strategy	Data collection method
District Education Officer (DEO)	6	6	Active DEOs of Gbarpolu	Purposeful	Focus group discussion
Primary school principals	139	6	Primary school principals Five years plus serving in the same capacity in rural schools.	Maximum variation	Focus group discussion
Active Teachers	445	6	Primary-school teachers. Non-permanent residents of Gbarpolu, Five years plus of teaching in rural communities	Convenience purposeful	Individual interview
Former teachers	To be determined	6	Primary teachers who left teaching within the past five years, 2018-2022	Convenience purposeful	Individual interview

Data for this study were collected from document analysis, interviews, and focus group discussions. The two focus group discussions were conducted with DEOs and school principals. Following the focus group discussions, the study proceeded with the active and former teachers' individual interviews. Data that was collected from the administrative documents were analysed and presented descriptively while transcription was done on the data from focus group discussions and individual interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data collection was done through focus group discussions and interviews. After the focus group discussions and interviews were held, the audio was recorded on an audio recorder and immediately transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Transcribe. The transcripts for the interviews and focus group discussions were printed and taken to the participants for member checking. Transcripts were then printed and stored physically and electronically in a secure location.

Next, the researcher reviewed the reflective notes taken to identify any segment of the data used. I read through the entire transcript and began identifying and highlighting key phrases and sentences, and created codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Next, I completed the axial coding process which involved grouping of the codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, I condensed the codes and created categories. Finally, the categories were compared with the field notes and four themes were derived.

The four central themes that emerged from the data analysis are:

1. Infrastructure factors that impede the development of robust school systems
2. Personal factors that affect teachers' turnover decisions
3. Systematic governmental factors that hinder the retention of teachers in rural Liberia.
4. Cultural factors that either support or hinder teacher retention in rural Liberia

The themes that are developed from data analysis and associated codes are displayed in Figure 1.

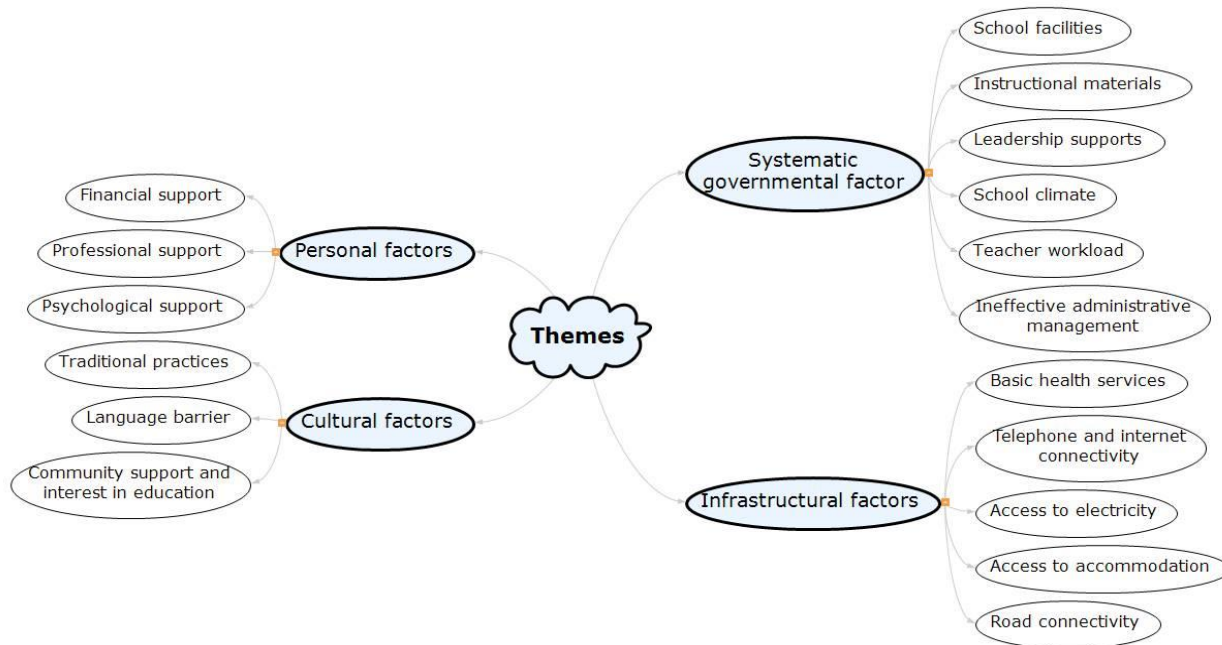


Figure 1: Themes and Code Generated

The themes are expanded on and integrated with existing turnover and leadership theories to develop a new model for retention to improve the retention of teachers in rural communities.

Infrastructure Factors That Impede the Development of Robust School Systems

Infrastructure factors, including basic health services, telephone and internet connectivity, access to electricity and accommodation, and road connectivity, contribute to the turnover of teachers in rural communities. These environmental factors are linked to community remoteness. These factors are above the direct limit of the Ministry of Education but impact the retention of teachers in rural communities. Teachers assigned to rural communities find themselves isolated from their families and basic services because of the remoteness of their communities. This feeling of isolation discourages teachers from teaching in rural communities and results in them abandoning their positions in rural schools.

Personal Factors That Affect Teachers' Turnover Decisions

Personal factors include both positive and negative ones that affect teachers' decisions to either remain in or exit their positions in rural areas. These factors include irregular and low salaries, lack of professional development opportunities for teachers, separation from the family because of rural assignments, and passion for teaching. Irregular and low salaries were key factors contributing to teachers' decisions to leave the classroom. Both teachers and school principals lamented that they were paid the same low salary without any incentives as their colleagues taught in urban schools.

Not only were rural teachers compensated poorly, but they also experienced delays in the disbursement of their salaries. The low and inconsistent payment of teachers to teachers is among the strongest personnel factors that contribute to teacher turnover in rural communities. Young teachers who have abundant positions in rural communities attributed their decision to leave their teaching positions because they were denied professional development opportunities by county- and district-level officials. Teachers remain teaching, provided that the reason why they continue to teach in rural communities is their passion for the teaching profession.

Systematic Governmental Factors That Hinder the Retention of Teachers in Rural Liberia

Systematic governmental factors include structural elements at the central, county, district, and school levels that impede the proper operation of schools. These include the physical facilities of the school and instructional resources at the school level. The data revealed that the appalling conditions of schools and severe shortages of learning resources that are vital to student learning prevented teachers from achieving professional objectives of improving school learning, resulting in school turnover.

Leadership support for teachers is another school-level factor influencing a teacher's decision to remain and leave a particular school. Schools with support and open leadership structures were likely to retain teachers, while teachers were likely to leave schools with poor leadership support for teachers. Teachers' workload was another structural factor contributing to teachers' turnover in rural communities. Teachers in rural communities were heavily loaded. In some instances, one teacher taught the entire school with more than a hundred students. This can discourage teachers and lead them to abandon their position in a particular school or rural community. Teachers' workload was found to contribute to teachers changing schools in rural communities.

The lack of accountability and supervision of schools in rural communities has contributed to teachers' turnover. This was another systematic governmental factor found to impact the turnover of teachers. The data revealed that most schools in rural communities remained unsupervised by district and county officials. This was due to the lack of mobility for officials and the remoteness of school communities. Consequently, most schools in rural areas operate independently. In this case, teachers will abandon their positions without the knowledge of MOE officials. When this happens without appropriate disciplinary measures taken by the MoE against teachers abandoning their positions, other teachers leave their positions as well. The weak supervision and accountability system in rural communities is a major turnover factor for teachers.

The ineffective administrative management structure of the MOE authorities was found to contribute to the turnover of teachers in rural communities. Management of the Liberian education sector is heavily centralised. County-level officials, including county education officers (CEO), District Education Officers (DEOs), and school principals, indicated that their inputs are rarely considered by central officials. This can result in a turnover of teachers in rural communities. Specifically, the county-level officials indicated that when a teacher leaves a school in rural communities, and the personnel actions notices are communicated to central authorities, actions are not immediately taken, and in some cases, the actions are delayed. This causes other teachers to leave their positions without disciplinary action.

Cultural Factors That either Support or Hinder Teacher Retention in Rural Liberia

Cultural factors either support or hinder teacher retention in rural communities. These depict the cultural elements within the school environment that impact the operation of schools. The factors found to affect teacher retention include traditional practices, language barriers, and school-community relationships. Traditional practices hinder teachers' retention in rural schools. Training schools interrupt the formal school calendar, which can affect school enrolment. School-going children sometimes abandon formal schools to attend traditional schools, reduce enrolment, and, in some cases, close all schools in some communities.

Teachers are sometimes compared to join the traditional practices of host communities; if they refuse, they are considered outsiders and intimidated, resulting in them leaving the community. Language barriers are another factor contributing to teacher departure. The official language of instruction in Liberia is English, and instruction is conducted in the local languages of some communities in rural areas. Teachers who are unable to learn the local language of their host communities are unable to provide instruction, forcing them to abandon their positions in rural communities.

Another cultural factor that can support or hinder teacher retention in rural communities is the school-community relationship. In rural communities, communities play a vital role in the operation of schools. Community support for schools is vital for the retention of teachers in rural Liberia. Not only are communities there to receive teachers, but they also play a role in the retention of teachers in their communities.

Four main themes surfaced from the data analysis. These included infrastructure factors that impede the development of robust school systems, personnel factors that affect turnover decisions, systematic governmental factors that hinder the retention of teachers in rural Liberia, and cultural factors that either

support or hinder teacher retention in rural Liberia. These four themes were integrated into leadership, change, and teacher turnover theories to derive a new model for teacher retention.

Discussions of Findings

The study findings both corroborate and provide a new understanding of teacher turnover and retention. Unlike previous literature, which attributes teacher turnover situations to organisation characteristics and working conditions, teachers' personal and professional factors and school relationships with the community, this study extends teacher turnover determinants to the system and infrastructure. The study further presents additional factors that contribute to teacher turnover, such as lack of health, telephone and internet connections, poor electricity and accommodation, poor road conditions, ineffective administrative management, language barriers, and traditional practices.

A New Model to Enhance Teacher Retention

According to (Maslow, 1954; Maslow, 1993), when individuals' basic needs for survival are unmet, it can result in demotivation. Salaries paid to rural teachers cannot enable them to meet their basic needs, serving as a demotivator and a source of turnover for teachers. To enhance the retention of teachers in rural communities, it is essential to ensure that teachers' basic needs for survival are met. As indicated by an interview participant, retention of teachers will improve when their basic needs are met; she revealed, "I don't think you will be receiving your correct salary on time...then you will decide to leave the classroom" (Participant 1).

Teachers not only face low salaries but also deal with the instability and irregularity of their salary. Another issue affecting teachers' motivation is the inconsistent timing of salary payments. Educators expressed their concerns about late or unreliable salary disbursements, which lead to financial difficulties. The data revealed that teachers experience arbitrary reduction of salaries.

One participant of the interview added: "some of the things that can encourage teachers to remain in the classroom is, number one, teacher salary. It should not be sometime that is not stable. Every time shortage, every time, declining, declining, and reducing, reducing. It can make the person discouraged" (748-750). She further explained that to retain teachers, teacher salaries should be "a specific sum or even improved. Not every time teacher salary should be decreasing. The irregular payment of salaries to teachers, coupled with the arbitrary reduction, can affect teacher motivation and turnover decisions. The studies revealed that infrastructural, cultural, and systematic factors contribute to teachers' turnover decisions in addition to the personal factors.

Findings of the study portray the teacher turnover situation in rural communities as a complex and multi-dimensional adaptive challenge that is beyond the authority of the MOE. The conventional supply size approach to tackling teacher turnover problems by using 'authoritative expertise' through supplying more teachers to occupy vacancies would be worthless (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Ingersoll, 2003). Solving the teacher turnover challenge, which is an adaptive problem with different dimensions, by "applying conventional wisdom, precedents, and policies" (Schaller, 2005, p. 1). Similarly, attempting to improve teacher retention by addressing the organisational and personal factors and enhancing the school relationship with communities cannot effectively remedy the teacher retention situation.

Effective solutions to teacher turnover situations in rural communities should not proceed from the "authoritative" above, but from across the organisation through "collective intelligence of all stakeholders at all levels who need to use one another as resources, often crossing boundaries while leaning their way to solutions" (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997, p. 132).

The study revealed that essential elements that support or hinder the retention of teachers are cultural factors. The study revealed that even if the infrastructural, governmental, and personnel factors contributing to turnover are addressed without addressing the cultural factors, teachers will continue to abandon the classrooms. The cultural context of the school plays a major role in the retention of teachers. The solution suggested depicts that teacher retention efforts should be localised and integrated, as presented in Figure 2.

The research combined three leadership and teacher turnover theories (adaptive, organisational theory of teacher turnover and the Four-capital theoretical model of teacher retention) to propose a new model of teacher retention. The figure presents the four factors which impact teacher retention in rural communities mainly: infrastructural, personal, governmental, and cultural factors. The model proposed a community of practices model through "knowing and learning" (p.1) as effective lowering retention and improving retention of teachers in rural communities.

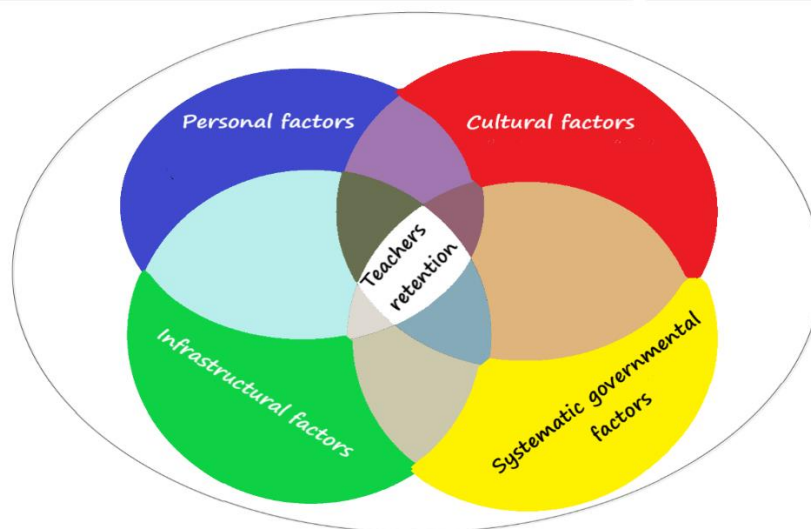


Figure 2: A New Model for Teacher Retention

The figure indicates teacher retention is a complex situation, effective solution to teacher retention will proceed from addressing infrastructural, personal, systematic, and cultural factors contributing to the turnover. This research suggested that retention strategies should be comprehensive, taking into account all factors influencing teacher turnover. This would mean utilising locally driven methods instead of the traditional top-down strategy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Using the Newly Proposed Model in the Education Sector of Liberia

The findings of the study led to the development of a new model for teacher retention in rural communities. The conventional approach to addressing the teacher turnover situation in rural communities is to supply more teachers. However, as Ingersoll (2001) suggests, recruiting more teachers to fill in vacancies created by turnover alone without addressing the root causes of turnover would be ineffective.

Similarly, Mason and Matas's (2015) four model theory of teacher retention described teacher turnover as a complex phenomenon resulting from four non-economic capitals, including social, human, positive psychological, and structural.

To address teacher turnover, according to Mason and Matas's (2015), the determinants of teacher turnover factors should be understood and addressed effectively. The new model for retention of teachers derived from the findings of this study similarly described the situation of teacher turnover as complex phenomenon caused by the interaction of infrastructural, personal, systematic governmental and cultural factors. This model suggests that solving teacher retention should be addressed using the bottom-top approach. This implies that effective retention strategies should be led by the local communities.

Solving teacher turnover from the central level, top-down, at the central level would be inadequate, given that cultural factors contribute in the retention of teachers. The data revealed that addressing the teacher turnover situation should be led by the local authority of the MOE in collaboration with the community and guided and overseen by the central office.

Employing the Community of Practice Model

The community of practice was developed by a group of public sector internal auditors from Eastern Europe and Central Europe who decided to work together and share work and resources over time, which gave their meetings purpose and persistence. Communities of practice are "formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor.... groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how they do it best as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, pp. 1-2). The community of practice is a group of people with common purposes that are intentionally interacting, learning, and growing to meet their defined objectives. Three characteristics of the community of practice are the domain, the community, and the practice.

The domain within the community is shared competence that separates the members from the wider society. A community is the space where a group of people jointly interact to enable them to learn and grow together from each other as they pursue their stated objectives. The practice is when a group of like-minded people frequently interacts and "share resources to solve recurring problems" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). A community of practice is a group of like-minded people intentionally working together over a sustained period to resolve recurring and intractable problems. This community can exist informally or formally within and across organisations, government, and religion.

Guidelines for Employing the Community of Practice in the Liberian Education System

The study indicates that teachers are leaving classrooms because of infrastructural, personal, systematic governmental and cultural factors. In addition to the implementation of the Education Reform Act of 2011, the lack of a structured, continuous professional development program for rural teachers is another determinant of rural teacher turnover.

Some of the reasons that account for teachers' departures from rural classrooms revolve around ineffective administrative procedures and a lack of decentralisation of the education system, as suggested by the Education Reform Act of 2011. Specifically, the data shows that teachers are hired and assigned in rural communities by the central office of the MOE, with little or no involvement from local communities. This

situation can result in cultural, infrastructure, and personal factors that impede teachers' retention in rural communities. Teachers deployed in rural communities remained unsupervised; as a result, most teachers assigned to rural communities could not take up their assignments, while some could take their assignments and later abandon their positions without any administrative action against them. The primary reasons for the teachers' departure can be attributed to the ineffective implementation of the Education Reform Act of 2011.

To improve public primary school teachers' retention in rural communities, the common practice model should be integrated into the existing structure of the education system of Liberia, and the Education Reform Act of 2011 should be fully implemented. Given that cultural factors play a vital role in the retention of teachers, the community of practice can be developed around schools at the central, county, district, and school levels. This would entail groups of people sharing a concern or passion for education working at their levels to discover recurring problems within the education system and to provide sustainable and practical solutions. In this case, solutions to the problems will not be imported from the 'high up,' the central authority of MOE, and imposed on the local authorities. Local authorities, comprising communities and school administrators, would collaborate locally at their respective levels to initiate solutions to the recruiting and complex problems of teacher turnover and suggest solutions to the central administration of the Ministry of Education for review and approval. For example, the school administration, PTA, and DEOs can lead to the recruitment of teachers from the community.

This can start as early as the recruitment process for pre-service training at the Rural Teacher Training Institutes (RTTIs). The school administration working in the local community can identify and recruit personnel for training from within the school community. To enhance female interest in the teaching profession, the community recruitment should prioritise and incentivise females throughout the recruitment process. After graduation, the community can recommend graduates identified, recruited, and sent to the RTTIs for employment in the immediate community of the graduate. This will reduce the social distance between the community, teachers, and students. It will address the systematic governmental factors that cause teachers to be assigned to rural communities by the MOE central authority without taking on assignments. Regarding infrastructural challenges resulting in teacher turnover, the locally recruited teachers will be from the community and might not experience the same level of infrastructural challenges encountered by a stranger. Finally, the community can easily and quickly recommend a replacement if that teacher attempts to abandon their position.

The domain in this community is the desire for educational improvements at different levels. The community should be created within the different structures of the education system. At the local level, the community will comprise the PTA and be made up of different stakeholders in education. The district level will be a district school board supporting the district education office, while at the county level, it will comprise county school boards supporting county education officers, and the National Education Advisory Committee will support the central Ministry of Education to enhance school operations. The practices will be sustained through engagements at their respective levels to discover problems facing education and derive sustained solutions. The central office of the Minister of Education will serve supervisory roles because the local authorities will be responsible for the operations of schools with strengthened accountability and supervisory oversight.

In addition to the Education Reform Act of 2011, the MOE should develop and implement a continuous professional development program for teachers to ensure that teachers assigned to rural communities receive tailored and sustainable professional development and keep their practices current. The development of this program should include all stakeholders from all levels of education, and implementation should be delegated to the respective community of practices. Finally, the MOE central authority should enhance coordination with decentralised officials since the local authorities are primarily responsible for the operations of schools.

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