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The Persistent Situation of Teacher Turnover in Rural Communities: The Case of Public Primary School Teachers in Rural Liberia

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to assess factors that contribute to teacher turnover in rural communities across Liberia and identify practices that can be recommended to improve retention for teachers in rural communities. A qualitative case study design was employed to determine teacher turnover rates in public primary schools in Gbarpolu County between 2018 and 2022, and to explore related factors and potential remedies of teacher turnover. Twelve district education officers and primary school principals selected through purposeful multiple variation sampling strategies participated in two focus group discussions, and nine former and active teachers were interviewed. Data were analysed in an analytic cycle using a data spiral approach. The findings suggest that factors that contribute to public primary school teacher turnover are personal, infrastructural, systematic governmental, and cultural, while factors enhancing teacher retention are community support, ownership of schools, and local recruitment of teachers. Finally, recommendations were proposed to improve the retention of teachers in rural schools by employing a bottom-up approach that addresses the underlying contributors to turnover, rather than conventional methods of supplying more teachers.

Key words: Attrition, teacher retention, teacher shortages, turnover, turnover rate.



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INTRODUCTION

The education system has been unable to meet its goal of providing quality and relevant education to the citizenry because of systematic problems. Recent education statistics recorded a decline in access to quality and equity education across Liberia (Ministry of Education, 2022). These challenges compromise the pursuit of the goal of the country's educational system of providing all citizens with access to high-quality and relevant education, with rural communities needing high-quality education the

most experiencing the major challenges. One major hindrance to access to equitable education in Liberia is the poor quality of the teaching profession.

Between 2008 and 2015, the number of teachers teaching in the education system of Liberia nearly doubled from 26,359 to 55,243. Similarly, the number of teaching schools has increased from 55243 in 2015 to 71 and 2260 in 2022 (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Table 1: Liberia Teacher Statistics from 2007-2022 (Ministry of Education, 2022)

Level	2007/08	2015	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
ECE	11778	14311	14724	16128	16081
Primary	22253	30438	22488	31447	31372
Junior High	8228	12983	13345	14915	15192
Senior High	3652	6549	9646	8492	8615
Total teaching staff	26359	55243	60203	70982	71,260

The number of teachers teaching in schools across Liberia continues to grow, and the quality of the profession has grown. The percentage of qualified teachers teaching at the ECE level has increased from 29 per cent in 2008 to 60.7 per cent in 2022. Similarly, there was a 13 per cent increase in the number of qualified teachers teaching at the senior secondary level, from 53 per cent in 2008 to 66.17 per cent in 2022. While the quality and quantity of teachers in Liberia have improved over the past decades, there remains an imbalance in the distribution of teachers across the country.

Imbalances in teacher distribution result in poor learning outcomes for students, increased workload for teachers, and compounded equitable access to educational opportunities for students in remote communities (IIEP-UNESCO, 2017; Qin & Bowen, 2019). Conversely, those students in rural communities needing quality education end out receiving lower quality education. The purpose of this study is to investigate the major factors that contribute to teacher turnover in rural schools in Liberia. Specifically, the study focused on public primary schools teachers' turnover in Gbarpolu County in Liberia between 2018 and 2022.

This study established teacher turnover rates in Gbarpolu County, interviewed selected primary

school teachers and ex-teachers, and conducted focus group discussions with district education officers and principals within the selected county regarding their perceptions of the reasons why teachers leave teaching. This study will assist educators and administrators to understand reasons why teachers are leaving their positions in rural communities across Liberia and provide stakeholders with viable endorsed practices to improve the retention of teachers across Liberia and beyond.

The study aimed at addressing the following questions: What factors do teachers and school administrators believe contribute to teachers who have been deployed in Gbarpolu County between 2018 and 2022? What additional strategies should national governments and school administrators in rural Liberia make to increase teacher retention?

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations to consider when examining the findings of this study. These conditions might have affected the findings of the study. First, given the available time and resources, it is unrealistic for this study to consider all teachers leaving teaching in remote counties in Liberia between 2018 and 2022. This study focuses only on public primary school teachers in Gbarpolu County, which has high rates of unqualified primary teachers.

Given that the study predominantly employs an empirical phenomenology design, the aim is not to generalise the findings, but transferability, which is the ability of the study findings to be applicable in similar contexts or settings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The direct findings of this study can be applied only to the population under consideration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars are divided on how teacher turnover impacts schools. Some believe that turnover can have positive effects on schools as it creates a means for schools to offload low-performing teachers and hire more effective teachers (James & Wyckoff, 2020). Others asserted that a high teacher turnover rate has multidimensional negative effects on schools. Teacher turnover creates labour imbalances in demand for teachers. High teacher turnover can also create operational and academic challenges as schools struggle to replace existing staff, a situation that might negatively affect instructional delivery and outcomes (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

Turnover directly affects teachers and students' learning. Schools facing teacher shortages because of turnover can result in hiring unqualified or inexperienced teachers, increasing class sizes, or shortening course offerings, all of which negatively impact student learning (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Durrani et al., 2022; Menzies, 2023). Turnover affects instructional improvement and teacher collaboration, which affects the achievement of all students within the school. Finally, schools replacing teachers incur financial losses ((Ronfeldt et al., 2013). High teacher turnover negatively affects the labour market, the school as an organisation, and the learning communities (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Greufe, 2020; Menzies, 2023; National Education Association, 2022; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020)

Teacher Turnover Factors

A teacher's decision to leave or remain in the class is affected by numerous factors, ranging from their prior and continuing education to personality and

organisational conditions. Factors contributing to teacher turnover can be summarised as human, social, structural, and psychological. Human factors include pre-service education, professional skills and Knowledge, and opportunity for and relevance of continuing professional development. Social factors, on the other hand, include school culture, leadership characteristics, administrative processes, collaborations with colleagues and the school community, as well as prestige for the teaching profession (Ingersoll, 2001; Mason & Matas, 2015)). At the same time, structural drivers of a teacher's decision to exit school or profession include institutional policies, school resources and facilities. Finally, the positive psychological factor is the by-product of the three above factors and relates to the personality and psychological make-up of a teacher (Mason & Matas, 2015; Ingersoll, 2001).

Human Capital

Intrinsic motivation is essential in the retention of teachers (Mason & Matas, 2015). Most teachers stay in the profession because of their genuine desires to teach and find rewards in student improvement (Scroggs, 2021). If teachers feel underprepared to make the desired impact in the classrooms, they are prompted to walk away from their school or profession.

Human capital is defined as "Knowledge, collective skills, or other intangible qualities of individuals that can be used to create economic worth for them, their employers, or their community (Caverley et al., 2016, p. 573). Four factors associated with human capital are the presence, quality and nature of pre-service education, professional skills and Knowledge, and opportunities for and relevance of continuing professional development (Mason & Matas, 2015).

The shortage of teachers' professional Knowledge and skills has led to turnover decisions (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2018). Qualified teachers need to update their Knowledge and skill set to keep abreast of the developments and demands of the profession. This makes pre-service education alone insufficient for a lifelong career of teaching. If professional development is not available or relevant to qualified

teachers for their profession, teachers become redundant and are likely to leave the schools or profession (Noel & Finocchio, 2021).

Social Capital

Schools are social institutions. The quality of the relationships among various actors, including teachers, students, administrations, and the wider community, is vital in achieving the goals of education (Mason & Matas, 2015; Saks & Ilves, 2020). A trusting and honest school environment, where teachers freely interact with each other, share ideas, and build solid internal and external relationships with the community, is important for student learning and teacher retention (Gleason, 2020).

The quality of relationships a teacher has with members of the school community, including colleagues, students, administrators, and parents, can impact teachers' job satisfaction and retention decisions (O'Shea, 2021). Teachers with positive, collaborative, and supportive interactions with their school communities are likely to have increased motivation and decreased turnover intentions, whereas those with negative relationships with school environments have elevated turnover intentions (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Wang et al., 2024). A constructive connection between teachers and students can improve teachers' job satisfaction and enhance retention. For example, Hwang and Fitzpatrick (2021) investigated male teacher assignments and turnover using administrative data from Indiana Elementary Schools.

The study found that teachers working in underprivileged communities with higher disciplinary problems were more likely to migrate to other schools or leave the teaching profession than teachers working in privileged communities (Hwang & Fitzpatrick, 2021). Teachers who benefit from administrative support from school leadership improve their instructional practices and organisational commitment, and indirectly affect turnover decisions (Flores & Shuls, 2024; Hutton & Woodland, 2019; Tran & Smith, 2020). Formal school leadership support, from induction through professional development, is an essential component of teachers' job satisfaction and retention. Support

for teachers helps to strengthen pedagogical practices, improve performance and student learning, and decrease turnover intentions among teachers (Woodland & Mazur, 2019).

Structural Capital

Structural capital relates to the school's physical structure; policies and procedures for appointments and promotions; curriculum frameworks; and national, county, school, and classroom regulations (Mason & Matas, 2015). Teachers' views of their duties and responsibilities, including their attitudes or perceptions of their workload and conditions, inform their turnover decisions (Binder & Mácsai, 2021; Keçeci & Kara, 2023; Ladd, 2011). Teachers' workload is influenced by excessive job demands from administrators, students, and parents. Heavily loaded teachers are likely to have a higher intention of departing their profession (Zhang et al., 2022).

Teachers' working conditions are essential for their well-being, job satisfaction, attractiveness, and retention (Binder & Mácsai, 2021; Duncan, 2022; Turhan & Memduhoglu, 2022) include salary range, compensation, bonuses, rewards, working time, student-teacher ratios, leadership practices, facilities, responsibilities, and the nature of work (Hadush & Katheriyar, 2023). Negative perceptions about the working conditions of teachers may result in physical and emotional fatigue, which increases the teacher's intention to leave teaching in a particular school or teaching field. For example, (Turhan & Memduhoglu, 2022) investigated teacher turnover intentions in Van Province and found that working conditions were extremely influential features for teacher turnover decisions.

A qualitative case study by Fessehatsion and Peng (2021) in Eritrea on teacher turnover intentions discovered that the placement of teachers without preference, favouritism, and low remuneration directly affects teachers' intentions to leave school and profession. Social infrastructure designs, such as sanitation, access to clean drinking water, ventilation, and light, create comfortable learning environments and enhance student learning and retention.

Positive Psychological Capital

The positive psychological capital of teachers includes personality and mental factors that enhance their well-being and productivity (Mason & Matas, 2015). Career pathways play a fundamental role in determining teachers' psychological well-being. Teachers who enter the profession without passion only to fill vacant positions are likely to develop psychological issues, including commitment, adoption of coping strategies, demotivation, and dissatisfaction, which trigger an early departure of teachers (Amzat et al., 2020; Ayalew et al., 2022).

Teachers' psychological factors, including motivation, satisfaction, and adaptation, are by-products of their human, social, and structural capital (Mason & Matas, 2015). Given that schools with high turnover in rural communities' struggle to replace teachers when a particular teacher leaves a school (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), resulting in the hiring of unqualified teachers or individuals who are less passionate about teaching, psychological factors play a key role in teacher retention in rural communities with high turnover retention.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative case study was employed to investigate factors that contribute to teacher turnover and

explore strategies to improve teacher retention. A qualitative case study approach was selected because the study requires investigating the current situation to develop a deep understanding using specific illustrations (Merriam, 2009). The type of case study utilised was a collective case study using multiple cases to show different perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of teachers, principals, and education officers on the program of teachers within Gbarpolu County between 2018 and 2022.

The targeted population for this study was DEOS, public primary school principals, and current active and former primary school teachers within Gbarpolu County. Gbarpolu has six DEOS, 139 primary school principals, and about 415 active primary school teachers. The total number of exit teachers was established from the quantitative phase of the Research. Purposeful sampling strategies were used to choose participants, which allows the selection of relevant participants and sites that inform an understanding of problems (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purposeful sampling strategies that were applied were maximum variation and convenience. Table 2 provides detailed considerations for participation selections which guarantee variation in the study.

Table 2: Sample size, Selection criteria and Target

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 principal, five years plus serving in the same capacity in rural schools.	Maximum variation	Focus group discussion

Active Teachers	445	6	Primary teacher, non-permanent residents of Gbarpolu, with five years plus of teaching in rural communities	Convenience purposeful	Individual interview
Former teachers	51	6	Primary teachers who left teaching within the past five years, 2018-2022	Convenience purposeful	Individual interview

This study purposefully selected diverse “small-information-rich cases” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Twelve District Education Officers and principals, along with twelve teachers, served as the sample for the study.

Data for the study were collected from interviews and focus group discussions. The focus group discussions were held first, and then individual interviews were conducted. All the data collected from the focus groups and individual interviews were triangulated. All documents collected during data collection were placed in a secure location, and an audit trail was established to ensure the confidentiality and credibility of the study. The data collected were analysed for meaning, making it possible to answer the research questions. A spiral approach was employed to analyse the data. The spiral approach requires that the researcher proceed with data analysis in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data for the study were collected through focus group discussions and interviews with individuals. Two focus group discussions were held with two sets of people, for a total of twelve participants. The first group was six District Education Officers (DEOS) from Gbarpolu County. Five men and one woman, aged between 45 and 58, participated in the Focus groups. The participating DEOS served in the same capacities for between 5 and 7 years in the county, and all held bachelor’s degrees.

The second group of people who participated in the focus group comprised six current public primary

school principals. These principals were all C-Certificate holders who had served as principals for a minimum of five years in Gbarpolu. All the principals were also teaching in the classrooms. The focus group discussions were held in the County Education Office in Bopolu City, the capital City of Gbarpolu County. To enhance confidential interpretation, participant identifications were masked, and composite profiles were created to avoid identification (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ten individual interviews were conducted with public primary school teachers in two categories. The first category of teachers interviewed was five current teachers from five different districts. These include teachers who are teaching self-contained classes in lower primary (Grades 1-3) and different subjects in higher primary (Grades 4-6). The second set was former teachers who taught in Gbarpolu for more than five years and exited the classrooms between 2018 and 2022. Some of these former teachers were pursuing higher education outside the county, others were unemployed, while some had exited the teaching profession altogether. The interviews were held in selected locations that were convenient for the participants across Gbarpolu and Montserrado Counties. The participants for the individual interviews were masked to protect their identities and their details.

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. The transcripts were then printed and stored

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

Four themes emerged from the data analysis. These themes were derived inductively from immersion into the data and substantiated, revised, and

reconfigured throughout the data analysis processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

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.

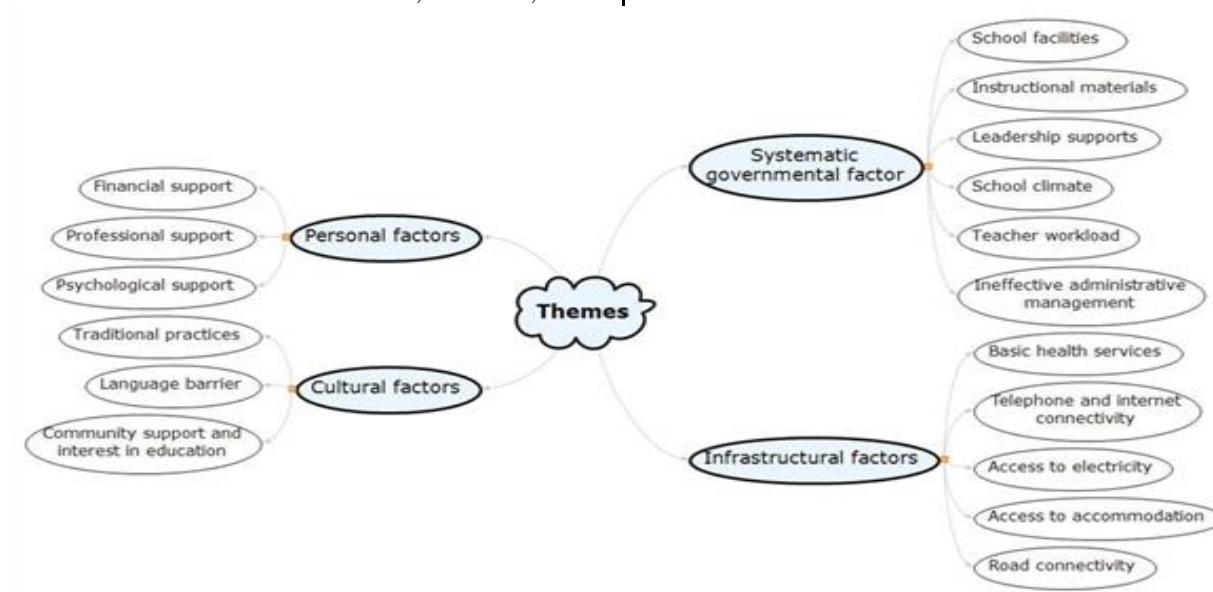


Figure 1: Themes and Code Generated

These themes are discussed in line with the purpose of the study which is to explore factors that contribute to public primary school teacher turnover with the aim of developing a new approach to improve teacher retention in rural schools. The four themes were integrated with existing teacher retention and leadership theories, and key findings emerged. Finally, a new approach to enhance teacher retention in rural communities was proposed.

Infrastructure Factors That Impede the Development of Robust School Systems

Infrastructure factors were found to impede the development of robust school systems in rural

communities. These are factors that are beyond the direct authority of the Ministry of Education that affect teachers' routines when they receive assignments to rural communities. The infrastructure factors that impede school operations in rural communities include bad road conditions, poor network connectivity, and lack of electricity, poor accommodation, and health services. One DEO described how teachers' inability to adjust to the rural environment can lead them to depart rural positions.

He explained: "Some of them linked to the change in environment. The man is in the city, he had gotten used to so many things, access to electricity, water,

access to stable communication, and you bring him to where it takes him two-three weeks before he can even communicate with his family. This is one reason". Teachers assigned in schools to rural communities indicated that they were isolated from colleagues, families, and opportunities because of the poor infrastructure in rural communities, including poor network, healthcare services, and technology. Based on the participants' responses, the poor infrastructure in rural areas affected the operation of schools and impacted teacher retention.

Personal Factors That Affect Teachers' Turnover Decisions

Personal factors that affect teachers' turnover decisions emerge during interviews and focus group discussions. The theme described the interplay of both positive and negative personal factors that affect a teacher's decision to exit or remain within an assigned school. This theme was framed from four codes: irregular and low salary, lack of professional development opportunities for teachers, separation from family because of rural assignment, and passion for teaching. Irregular and low salaries were two factors that negatively affected public primary school teachers' decision to depart assigned schools in rural communities. Based on the Interviews, focus groups, and discussions, participants expressed that rural teachers are paid extremely low salaries, irregularly, and without incentives. One participant of the focus group discussion, a rural public primary school principal, explained his desire to migrate to the urban community due to the financial hardship he had endured for about 11 years. He stated that: "...teachers are leaving...since 2013, I got on the government payroll, there has not been no increment, the salary is very low.

You have got children living in Monrovia, you got to send them to school and take care of them, and you have to pay for other things". Another participant, a public primary teacher stated: "Some of the things that can encourage teachers to remain in the classroom is number one, teacher salary. It should not be something that is not stable, every time shortage, every time, declining, declining, and reducing, reducing. It can make the person discouraged." (Participant 1). Teachers teaching in rural areas complained of low and irregular salaries,

which demotivated them and led to their decision to depart from their teaching positions in rural areas.

Another factor stated by the participants that can demotivate teachers and lead them to leave their assignments was the lack of professional development opportunities for rural teachers. Current and former teachers expressed that there are no professional development opportunities for rural teachers to stay current in their practices and develop new skills. One lower primary teacher described teaching as a dead-end profession that is not worth pursuing because of the lack of professional development opportunities for rural teachers. She stated: "...there is no training; people are not going for training to evaluate themselves and refresh their minds. It just looks like dirt, just like people do not have time for education" (Participant 1).

Participants, mainly former teachers, expressed that their requests for study leave were denied by their DEOs. Former teachers explained that the lack of professional development opportunities discourages the growth mindset among young teachers serving in rural communities and is a key reason for young teachers to abandon their posts in rural communities. A former young teacher narrated how he was blocked from working with all government entities within Liberia after taking study leave against the will of the DEO. He explained: "...when I asked for just one year, they said, as soon as you leave, we will take your name off the payroll. One of the bad things they did to me was to blacklist my name.... What this means is that I cannot work with any other government entity within Liberia" (Participant 7).

The third personal factor that affected teachers' turnover decisions was separation from family because of rural assignments. According to them, the government does not provide any form of support to teachers assigned to rural communities to soften their transition processes. This could lead to the separation of teachers from their families when assigned to rural communities.

Teachers' desire to be with their families and the extra burden of supporting two homes created by the separations can lead teachers to abandon rural communities. One DEO explained how he succeeded in retaining a high school teacher by providing him

with accommodation for his family. He believed that when teachers are provided with support, including accommodation to house their families, they are likely to remain in their posts in rural communities (Focus Group 1).

A primary school teacher narrated how she left teaching in Gbarpolu to care for her family in Monrovia because she was not provided with proper accommodation to host them. She stated: "...I don't even have a sleeping place to sleep then I take the children, at least where I was going to stay and work and I have a housing...I can say let me take my child along..., where I do not have a housing unit..., I cannot carry a child along....I prefer to want to stay with them..." (Participant 6).

The final personal factor that affected teachers' turnover decisions examined during data analysis was teachers' passion for the teaching profession. According to participants, there was no external motivation for teaching in rural Liberia. According to teachers, the prime reason they continue to thrive in rural positions is their passion for teaching and their desire to give back to the communities. The participants explained that the national government does not give them the required attention and support desired, as such, they felt abandoned and isolated. For them, there is no point other than a genuine love for the teaching profession, keeping them in their positions in rural communities. A public primary school teacher described her professional fulfilment and satisfaction with teaching as the principal reason that has kept her in the classroom. She explained: "The number one reason is the passion I have for the job. Even when I leave the classroom for a day, I can feel bad. It is because of the passion that I have for the job" (Participant 1).

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

The systematic governmental factors that hinder retention of teachers in rural Liberia refer to all the features within the system, including people, policies, structure, and practices, at the central, county, district, and school levels influencing teachers' decision to leave schools. Based on the participants' responses, two structural factors that impede teacher retention were the physical facilities

of the school and the instructional resources. School physical facility enhances students' and teachers' motivation and retention according to the data analysis. Participants expressed that the appalling conditions of rural government schools' facilities hindered students' learning and deterred teachers from teaching in rural schools. For example, a primary school teacher interviewed stated: "We need some materials in the school..., no good cement... the schools need to be decent so that when the children come, ...they will sit down on the ground when you are writing...so to be frank, the government schools on this side, they are not up to date" (Participant 8).

The lack of instructional materials in schools was a factor that hindered teacher retention in rural schools. Participants expressed that the provisions of basic instructional materials, including textbooks, chalks, pens, and notebooks, can enhance teachers' job performance and overall job satisfaction. They indicated, however, that schools in rural communities do not have basic instructional materials for students' learning. One participant interviewed added, "People will not want to be in a school where when supplies are distributed, they are not able to get it...so as a teacher, you did classroom management, we must be in control of the class and, but the class is so disorganised. It is not motivating at all" (Participant 8).

The lack of school leadership support for teachers was a school-level systematic governmental factor that hampered teachers' retention in rural schools. Participants labelled principal working relationships as vital for teacher motivation and retention. A former teacher explained: "Sometimes, when you see that the principal is not someone who has a good working relationship with teachers, you may find teachers abandoning classes and seeking other places to work." (line, 1923-1924). Open and supportive school leadership enhances rural teachers' motivation, performance, and retention as revealed in the data analysis.

The final sub-theme arising from the field relating to systematic governmental school-level factors was the workload of teachers. Throughout the interviews, participants reported that most teachers teaching in

schools in rural communities were overloaded. One DEO narrated during a focus group discussion how teachers become ineffective when they are overloaded. According to him, when a teacher leaves a particular school, which is often a common phenomenon in rural communities, it can lead to an increase in the workload of the other teachers remaining at that school. The overload can lead to demotivation, which in turn can cause the incumbent teachers to leave, creating a circle that may result in the school administration hiring unqualified teachers to continue teaching in the classrooms. He stated, "...the school the persons are assigned in has other teachers, it can lead to increment in the workload of other teachers, when you are overloaded, you become ineffective" (Focus Group 1, line?).

There were instances recorded during the interviews and focus group discussions where a single teacher was teaching an entire elementary school. Another administrator further explained that most rural teachers are overloaded and overwhelmed because of the workload. He explained, "What we find out in most of the schools you have one or two teachers teaching almost all subjects...the more the load, the more the teachers will be discouraged" (Focus Group 2). When teachers are overloaded, they become overbroad, ineffective, and are likely to abandon their positions in rural communities.

Beyond the school level, another systematic governmental factor that contributed to teacher turnover was the lack of accountability and supervision of schools. The sub-theme described the weak supervision and accountability system in rural communities that serve as major contributors to teacher turnover. One teacher participant described how teachers are becoming weary and leaving their assignments without reprehension from the MOE authorities. In her words, the schools in rural areas were left "deaf and dump" and as a result, teachers were doing whatever they pleased, something that was accelerating teachers' departures from rural schools. She described the dormant status of schools in rural communities: "People supposed to be monitoring schools, monitoring school can encourage teachers... but no monitoring, nothing...they just left the schools deaf and dump; you can do anything you feel like doing, anytime you

feel like going to school, that is when you can go" (Participant 1).

A public primary school principal who participated in the focus group explained how teachers were abandoning schools without the Knowledge of the MOE authorities because of the lack of oversight by the MOE central administration. This situation, according to participants, can lead to the closure of schools in some communities. He stated: "...but in some of the hard-to-reach districts, there is no good monitoring system. So, you find out that teachers have abandoned the classrooms, your schools are dropping down in enrollment because of poor teachers, or let us say poor monitoring system" (Participant 1). Even though MOE provided motorbikes to all DEOS to enable them to monitor schools within their assigned districts, the DEOS complained that they had not been supplied with fuel to effectively execute their monitoring functions.

Another reason articulated by participants for the poor monitoring and supervision of schools is the deplorable roads. The data revealed that some schools in the hard-to-reach areas are not monitored by the Eos, resulting in unaccounted higher rates of teacher turnover in those rural communities. As specified by a principal, "Sometimes we have our bosses, and other schools are hard-to-reach schools...the areas are not accessible through motorbikes. The distances require intensive working, so the DEOS will not be able to reach out there to monitor what is going there..." (Focus Group 1). Teachers are leaving schools at an accelerating proportion in rural schools due to poor monitoring of schools by MOE officials.

Another sub-theme that emerged from the data analysis was the ineffective administrative management of MOE authorities, which had resulted in teacher turnover in rural communities. This sub-theme, ineffective administrative management, describes the weak centralised management of MOE, which accelerates turnover in rural communities. The participants, mainly the DEOS, indicated that they never had full control over teacher administration and management, and the centralised system of administration is impeding the operations of schools, including teachers' retention. According to DEOS, on

most occasions, their input was not considered or was delayed in being acted upon by the central administration of the MOE, a situation which can negatively impact effective administration of schools and lead to the departure of teachers.

The DEOS lamented that when they communicated personnel action notices, they took longer to be processed, in some cases, and it was never acted upon. The apparent futile management of schools, mainly in rural areas, can lead to both discouragement and abandonment among committed teachers and school administrators as well. For example, many teachers assigned in the rural areas have not taken assignments, and when the DEOS reported against their actions to central administration, they could not be acted upon at all, or if any action could be taken, it could be delayed.

A DEO indicated that eight teachers assigned in his district about a year before the data collection failed to take their assignments. According to him, he had reported the case to the central office of the MOE without any reply, while the teachers were still being compensated. He clarified: "...last year, some teachers were employed in my district, I think about eight teachers were assigned, before the close of the school, one did not even show up. One came briefly but one later left" (Focus Group 1, line 9-11). Another DEO explained how 13 teachers were assigned to his district, but only one reported briefly and later left. The situation, according to the DEOS, had embarrassed them and led to the hiring of suboptimal teachers who were being compensated by the communities. He stated: "... thirteen teachers were employed, among the 13 persons, only two of them came, and since then, they have not returned...this situation had embarrassed us to the extent that the community had to hire teachers to replace them" (Focus Group 1).

Respondents further elaborated that a similar situation could occur when a teacher abandons the school, or vacancies are created because of voluntary resignation and death. Ineffective administration of the county school system by the MOE central office, including their refusal to penalise delinquent teachers, is feeding teacher turnover in rural communities, leading to a high turnover of teachers.

One DEO expressed that some of the teachers assigned to his district were roaming around the district while still being salaried, a condition that led to discouragement among committed teachers. He said, "Those who are assigned in the district, some of them are already here. Some of them are passing around here ... but you know the problem is, once these people are getting their money in their phones, they do not get time" (Focus Group 1). According to participants, the situation of abandonment will persist and even worsen as long as the MOE continues to centralise and ineffectively manage the affairs of the education system, including its refusal to act against teachers who have abandoned their assignments.

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

The fourth theme, cultural factors that either support or hinder teacher retention depict cultural elements within the school environment that impact the operation of schools. Through focus group discussions and interviews, cultural practices in rural communities both support and hinder teacher retention in rural communities.

This first cultural factor, traditional practices, hinders teacher retention in rural schools. According to the participants, traditional schools interrupt school enrollment when they run in parallel with formal schools, as parents in rural communities lack interest in formal education. Parents prefer to send their children to bush schools rather than conventional schools. A DEO stated: "Majority of our people lack interest in education...you have a bush school charging \$10,000 per person, the people prefer to pay that money. ...but when it comes to Western education, if you charge \$500, it becomes difficult for them to pay..." (Focus Group 1). Traditional schools in communities were competing with formal schools in rural areas, leading to low student enrollment and even the closure of schools in some communities.

School-going children in rural communities, in some instances, can leave schools to attend the traditional or bush schools. A participant in the focus group discussion explained that traditional schools can be run in parallel to formal schools and can lead to low

enrollment. He detailed: "...we are not against traditional school, but bush school can be run during vacation time...but when conventional school is opening, then you open your own bush schools before they come back, they are already out of school" (Focus Group 1). The low enrollment in rural schools is the result of students abandoning classes to attend the bush schools. This situation can discourage teachers in rural areas and lead them to abandon their posts.

Traditional society's activities are another cultural factor that hinders teacher retention in rural areas. Teachers assigned to rural communities are forced to adhere to the traditional practices of the host communities. A primary school teacher described: "...if you are in the interior you are not part of them {the traditional practices}, you go through whole lots of things...intimidation...when you are outside, they will tell you say go inside you don't have to be outside...there are certain places you don't go, your children don't go there, sometime some people can feel so embarrassed and they decide to leave. Because you don't want to be part of them, but, that particular environment those are the activities there" (Participant 8).

Traditional practices play a major role in teacher turnover decisions. When teachers assigned to rural schools refuse to join the traditional practices of that community, they are likely to face harassment and intimidation, a situation which can compel teachers to abandon their positions in rural communities. Language is another cultural factor that can both impede and enhance teacher retention in rural areas. A primary school teacher explained how her ability to speak a local language enhances her work and retention in rural communities. She indicated: "The language aspect, I am a Gola woman...it is not difficult for me.... well also....so it is not difficult like that... it helps in teaching schools who are unable to speak English (Participant 5)

Another cultural factor that can support or hinder teacher retention in rural communities is the school-community relationship. In rural communities, DEOS relied on communities to hire and replace government teachers who had abandoned their positions. The DEO and principal can work with

communities to compensate teachers in cash or kind. A DEO described how some schools were run entirely by the PTA. He explained, "There is one school, which is a Junior High School that is run by all volunteer teachers, and the community compensate them" (Focus group 1).

Another DEO further explained "another method that one school is doing is to tax people by households that everyone should pay \$150Ld... that is working every well" (line, 249, 252). One DEO also explained "...there is a logging company working in my area. For the volunteer teachers working in the school, the company makes a budget for one year to be paying each volunteer teacher \$ 60us" (Focus Group 1, line 254-255). According to the respondents, community ownership of schools is vital to the success of the school, including teacher retention. Most teachers teaching in the rural communities are recruited and compensated by the communities. Schools where the communities are unable to compensate teachers are shut down.

Summary of Key Findings

The four themes that emerged from the analysis were 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 themes provide insights into what participants considered as contributors to teacher turnover in rural communities and strategies to improve teacher retention in rural communities in Liberia.

- A. Basic infrastructure needs to be developed in rural areas to retain teachers and students.
- B. In order for teachers to stay in their rural school positions, they need financial, professional, and psychological support.
- C. To mitigate teacher turnover rates in rural Liberia, the complex adaptive challenges within the governmental system need to be acknowledged and addressed.
- D. Cultural factors that hinder teacher retention should be identified and reduced, while cultural factors that promote teacher retention should be strengthened.

The teacher turnover situation in rural communities, as depicted in the above themes and findings, is a complex phenomenon. Figure 2 provides a summary of the study findings. It depicts that teacher retention in rural communities is impacted by diverse factors,

including infrastructural, personal, systematic governmental and cultural factors. These findings are integrated with leadership and teacher turnover theories to derive a new model for retention.

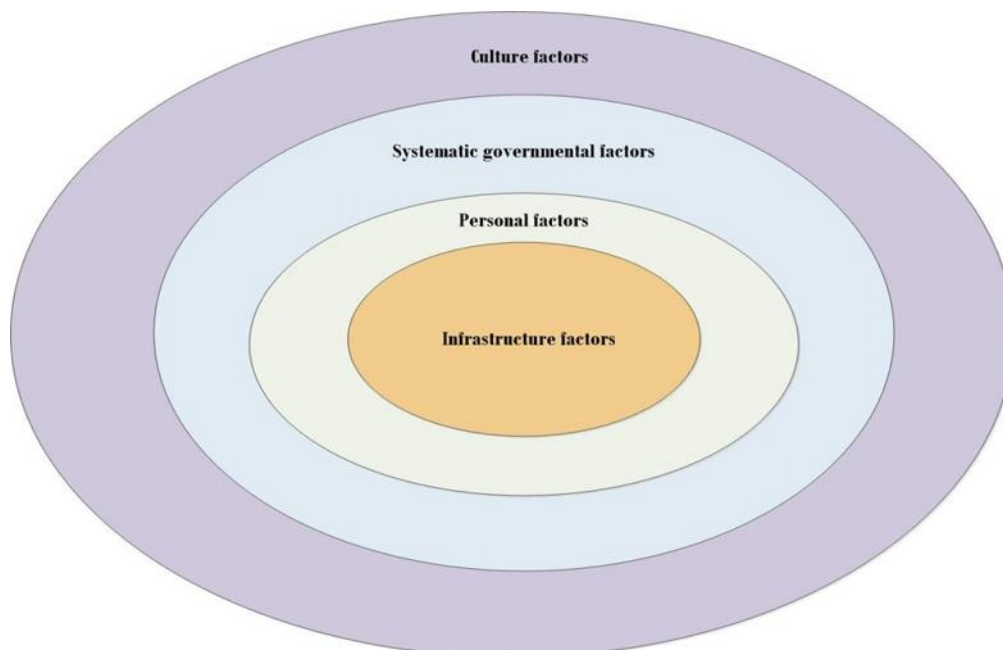


Figure 2: Teachers' Turnover

For Teachers to Stay in Their Rural Positions, they Need Financial, Professional, and Psychological Support.

In all the interviews and focus group discussions conducted, participants described financial, professional, and psychological factors affecting teachers as drivers of teacher turnover in rural communities. According to the participants, there was a lack of financial, professional, and psychological support for teachers assigned in rural areas, which can lead to teacher turnover in rural communities. Teacher turnover cannot effectively be addressed at the central office of the MOE; it requires the input of the local communities.

Discussions of Findings

Recently, there has been interest in the retention of teachers in rural communities. These literature have attributed root causes of teacher retention in rural to lack of administrative support to teachers, nonfictional, school organisational context, including

leadership, workload, pedagogical materials, lack of commitment to students, few opportunities for teachers, teachers' disconnection with communities, and broken personal and professional ties, and separation from family (Nguyen., 2020; Tran, 2021; Tran & Dou, 2019). This literature presents factors impacting teacher turnover decisions, such as organisation characteristics and working conditions, teachers' personal and professional factors, and school relationships with the community. The literature suggests that to improve teacher retention in rural communities, organisational and personnel factors leading to teacher turnover should be addressed, while at the same time, schools should enhance their relationship with communities.

The data analysis suggests that the overall infrastructure in rural areas impacts teacher turnover decisions in rural communities. The poor infrastructure resulted in teachers feeling isolated from family, colleagues, and opportunities,

influencing their decision to depart schools. These findings do not directly concur with any previous findings of existing literature on teacher turnover and retention. The findings provide fresh insights into the subject of teacher retention.

The analysis revealed that the lack of financial, professional, and psychological support for teachers in rural areas is a major reason for teachers leaving. These findings concur with (Mason & Matas, 2015). Which indicated that professional development opportunities for teachers, lack of financial, professional, and psychological support, and personality and psychological factors of teachers affect teachers' decisions to leave or remain in schools. Additionally, the study aligns with Ingersoll (2001), which indicated that organisational characteristics, including salaries, affect teachers' turnover decisions.

The findings show that systematic governmental factors, including school facilities, instructional materials, leadership support, school climate, workload, and ineffective administrative processes, affect teachers' decisions to leave or remain in schools. These findings align with Mason and Matas (2015) theory of teacher retention factors that suggest the presence and quality of leadership, school culture, the presence, quality, and nature of informal and formal support hinder teacher retention or support teachers' retention. Similarly, the findings of the study confirmed Ingersoll's (2001) organisational theory, which indicates that turnover is caused by a lack of administrative support for teachers. The study provides new understandings into the subject of teacher turnover by revealing that ineffective administrative management of the educational system can lead to teacher turnover.

Cultural factors that support or hinder teacher retention in rural communities include traditional practices, language barriers, community support, and interest in education. This study indicated that these cultural elements impact the operation of schools and teacher retention. These findings are like Mason and Matas (2015) four model theory of teacher retention, mainly the quality of relationships with members of the school community. This data analysis provided

additional insights into teachers' turnover decisions by suggesting that language barriers and the traditional practices of rural communities impede teacher retention.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion: Teacher turnover is a complex issue that cannot be resolved using a single strategy. Contributors to teacher turnover include infrastructure, personal, systematic governmental and cultural factors. However, cultural factors play vital roles in the retention of teachers. Even if all other contributors to teacher turnover are addressed without considering the element, teachers will leave their assignments in rural communities. Key factors responsible for the retention of teachers were community support and ownership of schools, teachers' passion for professional fulfilment, and local recruitment.

Teacher turnover is linked to the shortages of qualified teachers in the classrooms in rural communities. Schools facing higher turnover results in the hiring of unqualified teachers from the communities to fill in vacancies. This situation negatively impacts the quality of instruction in rural communities and creates deep learning inequalities across different regions of Liberia. School communities play a vital role in the administration of schools in rural areas, including the retention of teachers.

Recommendation: For the past few years, the central office of MOE has abandoned supporting schools in rural Liberia. Therefore, DEOS are engaging the local communities of the schools to develop innovative homegrown strategies to support schools and retain teachers. These strategies include cash and kind support for teachers, which have proven effective but need to be supported, standardised, and sustained. For example, when a teacher abandons schools in rural communities, the community can recruit volunteer teachers from the local community, in which case the community can take responsibility to compensate the volunteer teachers.

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