

Professional development in Georgian regional secondary schools: Insights from teachers' perspective

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Article Info

Keywords

Educational reforms,
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Highlights:

- PD programs often mismatch teachers' practical classroom needs.
- Regional schools struggle with limited PD access.
- Peer collaboration and mentoring strengthen teacher development.
- National PD policies lack alignment with local contexts.
- Teachers call for continuous, practice-oriented training.

Abstract

This research explores teachers' perceptions of professional development (PD) in Georgia, focusing on their specific needs, the alignment of PD programs with those needs, the challenges faced, and potential solutions. It particularly examines the impact of Georgia's teacher PD scheme on regional secondary schools. The paper adopts Desimone's model as its conceptual framework, as it effectively identifies key qualities and influencing factors that shape teachers' learning. Using a qualitative research design, the study employs semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions based on Desimone's framework. The findings indicate that teachers strongly affirm the positive influence of PD on student learning outcomes. However, they also highlight that student motivation and interest significantly affect the effectiveness of PD initiatives. While well-structured PD enhances teaching practices, unmotivated students may not fully benefit from these improvements. Additionally, the article reveals that internal school practices play a critical role in the success of PD, whereas Desimone's framework primarily emphasizes coherence and group engagement. Furthermore, Desimone's model does not explicitly account for the subjective nature of assessments, complicating the relationship between PD and student learning outcomes. By emphasizing the importance of customization, balanced approaches, hands-on activities, internal school dynamics, and the subjective nature of evaluations, this paper extends Desimone's conceptual framework. It contributes to the ongoing discourse on teacher PD by offering a more nuanced perspective on what constitutes effective PD, ultimately informing the design of more impactful PD programs in educational settings.

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INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, the professional development (PD) has emerged as a prominent approach to foster the continuous learning and growth of teachers (Liu & Liao, 2019). PD is described as 'a complex process' involving the 'cognitive and emotional' engagement of individual teachers and collective efforts (Avalos, 2011). Understanding the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of PD is crucial for comprehending the outcomes, whether successful or unsuccessful, of various educational reforms (Desimone, 2009). These reforms go beyond the mere delivery academic knowledge in specific subjects, aiming to cultivate 21st-century individuals who are actively engaged, self-motivated, self-assured, and compassionate learners (Bautista and Oretga-Ruiz, 2017). The pursuit of a more comprehensive education for students has led to an increased demand for highly qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). However, despite its intended purpose, PD does not always result in effective professional learning (Easton, 2008). Measuring the effectiveness of PD in causal studies is challenging due to the diverse range of experiences that contribute to teacher learning (Desimone, 2009).

Current PD opportunities provided by the state to teachers in Georgia are viewed as inadequate. These opportunities face criticism for failing to effectively address the challenges of the educational environment in terms of both content and format. The critique includes a lack of focus on improving teaching and learning processes, neglect of the individual needs of teachers and the school community, and a misalignment with the genuine objectives of teachers' evaluation (Community Alliance – "for Teachers", 2023). These issues are especially evident in regional schools, where professional learning opportunities remain inconsistent and dependent on resources. To systematically assess the effectiveness of PD in Georgia, this study uses Desimone's (2009) core conceptual framework, which defines effective professional development through five interconnected components—content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. This framework was selected because it offers a clear, empirically validated structure for examining how teachers learn, how PD influences instructional change, and ultimately, student outcomes. It is also one of the most widely used models in international PD research, allowing the results from Georgia to be meaningfully compared with global evidence and placed within broader scholarly debates. Moreover, Desimone's framework closely aligns with the current needs of Georgia's educational context, where existing PD initiatives lack coherence, relevance to the local setting, and systematic evaluation. Using this model therefore provides a thorough and theoretically solid basis for exploring teachers' experiences and for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of professional development in regional secondary schools.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to address four key questions formulated according to Desimone's theoretical framework and investigate teachers' perceptions of PD in regional secondary schools in Georgia.

- RQ-1 What knowledge and skills, as well as attitudes and beliefs, were acquired by teachers through the program of PD?
- RQ-2 How do teachers perceive the influence of PD on their instructional practices?
- RQ-3 How do teachers understand the relationship between changes in their teaching practice and students' learning outcomes?
- RQ-4 How do teachers perceive the alignment between existing PD opportunities and their professional needs?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide valuable insights and recommendations for enhancing PD practices in regional secondary schools in Georgia.

Georgia's Teacher Professional Development Landscape

One of the main goals of education reform in Georgia, which began in 2003, was to focus on the professional development (PD) of teachers and offer them diverse curricula and growth opportunities. In 2006, the Center for Teacher Professional Development was established (MES, 2006) with the main aim of improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools. This was achieved by setting high standards for teachers' professional knowledge and practice, as well as by elevating the status of the teaching profession. Teacher certification was introduced in 2009 (MES, 2009), starting as a voluntary process. Teachers who passed certification exams could gain senior or leading teacher status, resulting in higher pay. The teacher PD program launched in 2011 was designed to advance teachers' careers through specific levels and credit-earning options. Every eight years, teachers could move up one category based on accumulated credits and required elective activities (Chanturia et al., 2020). However, a 2012 qualitative study by the Institute of Social Research and Analysis (2012) found several issues, including underqualified trainers, lecture-heavy sessions, a narrow focus on exams, and limited training choices. The study also noted a lack of teacher awareness about the mandatory

certification process. A subsequent study conducted two years later by the Institute of Social Research and Analysis (2014) echoed similar concerns.

In 2014, the National Center for Teacher Professional Development (2019) developed an action plan for 2016-2019, outlining four strategic directions: (1) Development and implementation of Professional Standards; (2) Support for ongoing professional development (PD) and career growth for targeted groups; (3) Implementation of targeted interventions to ensure equal access to quality education; and (4) Organizational development of the center. By pursuing these strategic directions, the National Center for Teacher Professional Development aimed to enhance the overall quality of education and promote the continuous growth and development of teachers across the country. On February 20, 2015, the Georgian Government issued Decree No. 68 (2015), replacing the existing teacher PD system with a comprehensive new framework. This framework integrated a qualification structure and guidelines for entering the teaching profession, including teacher assessments for career advancement with a four-level progression path. However, these changes faced criticism from the teachers' union and education experts. Concerns centered on the requirement for junior teachers to record video lessons (Gorgodze, 2016) and the lack of support for report preparation, which led teachers to focus more on independent development (Chanturia et al., 2020).

Additionally, the new teacher PD and career growth scheme introduced an internal School Assessment system but faced challenges in non-Georgian-language schools due to teacher shortages, especially in subjects like Physics, Chemistry, and Biology. Concerns emerged about the validity of the assessment system and its effectiveness in supporting PD. Furthermore, there were no provisions for PD and assessments related to native languages such as Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Russian, which hindered career development and the maintenance of teaching standards for these teachers. Improving PD for native language teachers is vital for enhancing education quality in non-Georgian schools, especially in teaching the state language (Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2015). According to a Government Decree (2019), the previous Decree from the Government of Georgia (2015) was nullified, and a new scheme for teacher PD and career advancement was approved in Georgia. The new scheme requires teachers to pass examinations for career progression, accumulating credit scores for elevation in status by June 2019 (Chanturia et al., 2020). As of 2021, Georgia has 58,870 active teachers, with 49,785 verifying their competence through exams. However, 6,780 teachers failed subject exams, losing their "practicing teacher" status, accounting for about 11.5% of all teachers. PD for teachers has become a formal process for salary increases and job retention, with scheme changes driven by political, social, and arbitrary factors. Critics argue that scheme development lacks a comprehensive evaluation of previous results (Chakhaia, 2023; Community Alliance – "for Teachers," 2023; Tkeshelashvili, 2021). In 2023, at the initiative of the Ministry (MES, 2023), significant changes and innovations were introduced into the teacher professional development and career advancement scheme. The main aim of the new scheme was to support teachers' professional growth and ensure career progression. It sought to refine the framework through active teacher participation, revise the conditions for status attainment, create new opportunities for special education teachers, and provide support for teachers from ethnic minorities. The Ministry's goal was to promote teachers' professional development in a more equitable and targeted way. However, these changes faced substantial criticism. Teacher professional development reforms in Georgia are often less based on evidence and lack a long-term strategic vision. Frequent and unplanned changes, oscillating between decentralization and centralization, create systemic uncertainty, while the low level of needs-based adaptation risks turning professional development into a formal obligation rather than a true tool for professional and subject-matter growth. The centralized approach further widened the gap between the "New School Model" and teacher professional development policies (Chakhaia, 2023).

Theoretical Background

This study adopts Desimone's (2009) conceptual framework for teacher professional development, which provides a robust model for analyzing the effectiveness of PD programs. Desimone identifies two central components: the definition of critical features of effective PD and the establishment of a theory explaining how PD influences teacher and student outcomes. The framework emphasizes the interconnectedness of PD experiences, teacher knowledge and practice, and student achievement. According to Desimone (2009), According to Desimone (2009), effective professional development integrates five mutually reinforcing features that together support sustained improvements in teaching. First, content focus ensures that PD strengthens teachers' subject-matter knowledge and the pedagogical strategies needed to teach that content effectively. Second, active learning encourages teachers to engage in collaborative lesson planning, analysis of student work, classroom observation, and reflective dialogue, allowing them to meaningfully apply new ideas. Third, coherence requires alignment between PD activities, teachers' prior knowledge, school priorities, and national policy, increasing the likelihood that new practices will be adopted and maintained. Fourth, sufficient duration—in both

contact hours and long-term engagement—is necessary for teachers to practice, refine, and internalize new approaches. Finally, collective participation promotes learning within professional communities, enabling shared problem-solving and consistent implementation across schools. Together, these components create the conditions under which PD can influence teacher learning, guide instructional change, and ultimately contribute to improved student outcomes.

While this framework provides a strong basis for evaluating PD, critics argue that the mere presence of these features does not automatically ensure positive outcomes. Sims and Fletcher-Wood (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021) contend that the effectiveness of PD depends not only on its duration but on the quality and intensity of engagement, emphasizing repeated practice as a key determinant of meaningful professional growth.

By applying Desimone's framework, this study examines how contextual factors, teacher motivation, and structural supports interact to influence the impact of PD programs on teacher practices and student learning outcomes. The framework allows for a nuanced understanding of both the systemic and individual factors shaping the effectiveness of professional development initiatives.

Literature

The conceptualization of teacher PD has evolved considerably over recent decades. Traditional views, often limited to formal workshops and one-off training sessions, have shifted towards more interactive, continuous, and context-sensitive approaches (Avalos, 2011; Easton, 2008; Guskey, 2002). Contemporary classrooms are increasingly diverse, requiring educators to prioritize multiculturalism, the inclusion of students with special needs, and the effective integration of technology (OECD, 2009). The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) identifies key pillars of effective PD, including continuous learning, career advancement, collaboration, professional autonomy, and recognition, emphasizing a holistic approach to cultivating highly competent educators capable of positively influencing student outcomes (OECD, 2020).

Current PD practices are embedded within daily teaching activities and occur across various contexts, offering teachers opportunities to enhance their pedagogical expertise (Desimone, 2009; Zein, 2017). However, as Zein (2017) notes, many PD programs fail to meet teachers' specific professional needs, resulting in limited acquisition of knowledge and skills. Contributing factors include inadequate program design by PD providers, insufficient responsibility assumed by teachers for their professional growth, limited institutional support, and challenging school environments, which may negatively affect teacher performance and lead to attrition.

Researchers indicate that the effectiveness of PD is highly variable. Studies conducted in diverse global contexts, particularly in developing and Third World countries, suggest that teachers often express dissatisfaction with programs that do not address their specific professional interests or contextual requirements (Gokmenoglu et al., 2016; Kabilan and Veratharaju, 2013; Kennedy, 2016). Guskey (2002) emphasizes that teachers seek practical and concrete strategies applicable to their daily teaching, and PD initiatives that fail to address these needs are unlikely to achieve meaningful outcomes. Guskey and Yoon (2009) further argue that there is no universally effective PD design; instead, successful programs must be carefully adapted to specific content, processes, and contextual factors.

Financial and structural factors also influence PD participation. Some scholars highlight the importance of financial support in motivating teachers to engage in professional learning (Appova & Arbaugh 2018; McMillan et al., 2016). Nevertheless, some of them suggest that pay-for-performance and evaluation policies, such as monetary rewards or salary increases, are insufficient motivators unless combined with intrinsic factors like opportunities for professional growth, achievement, and career advancement (McMillan et al., 2016). In addition, attitudinal barriers, such as lack of self-motivation, and physical or structural barriers, including limited knowledge of available opportunities, inadequate staffing, poor communication, and insufficient organizational support, can hinder teacher participation in PD (Bwanga, 2020).

Empirical studies further highlight challenges related to PD design and implementation. Eroğlu and Domus Kaya (2021) found that many teachers perceive in-service training as ineffective and irrelevant to their professional needs, reducing their motivation to engage meaningfully. In some cases, teachers participate in PD primarily for leisure or convenience rather than professional growth. School-level operational constraints, such as unsatisfactory evaluation systems, high workloads, and limited time for PD activities, also pose significant barriers to professional learning (Eroğlu & Domus Kaya, 2021).

Systematic reviews suggest that formal, structured PD programs are primarily assessed for their impact on teacher and student learning outcomes, yet only a limited number of studies rigorously examine this impact (Ventisata & Brown, 2023). Despite these challenges, the past decade has seen a clear shift towards more comprehensive, interactive, and contextually relevant PD, guided by the principles outlined in TALIS (OECD, 2020).

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design to examine teachers' perceptions of PD in regional secondary schools in Georgia. The phenomenon under investigation is teachers' lived experiences of participating in state-provided PD and how they interpret its relevance, effectiveness, and alignment with their professional needs. The qualitative approach was necessary for exploring this phenomenon because it allows for a deep understanding of the subjective meanings, contextual factors, and school-level dynamics that influence teachers' engagement with PD. As Flick (2022) notes, a qualitative design provides a structured framework for addressing complex, multifaceted issues, enabling a thorough investigation of the phenomenon within available time and resources. In this study, this approach enabled a detailed examination of how teachers describe, assess, and understand PD within Georgia's unique socio-educational landscape.

Participants

The study sample consisted of 14 teachers from diverse subject areas, grade levels, years of experience, and professional statuses, as well as one private school principal. Participants represented schools with varying opportunities for professional development. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies were employed to ensure that individuals with relevant and diverse perspectives were included. Purposive sampling enabled the selection of participants with specific expertise and experience, while snowball sampling facilitated the recruitment of additional participants recommended by their colleagues. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of participants, including gender, subject area, qualifications, years of experience, professional status, and school type.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit participants' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences concerning PD. The interview guide was informed by Desimone's (2009) conceptual framework and supplemented with insights from the broader literature. This structure enabled consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility to probe emerging themes in detail. Interviews were conducted between June and September 2022, either on-site or online, depending on participant availability and preference. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

Data analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim in Georgian and subsequently translated into English for analysis. A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurrent patterns and themes in participants' accounts. Deductive coding, based on Desimone's framework, was combined with inductive coding to capture emergent themes not anticipated by the theoretical framework. This dual coding strategy ensured a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions and experiences of PD in regional Georgian schools. Several measures were taken to enhance validity and reliability, consistent with established standards in qualitative research. To strengthen validity, the analysis employed methodological transparency and reflexive engagement. This included maintaining detailed analytic memos, documenting interpretive decisions, and revisiting transcripts multiple times to ensure that emerging themes were firmly grounded in the data. A cross-participant comparison was also conducted to assess whether the identified patterns remained consistent across teachers from different regions and school types.

To enhance reliability, an audit trail was maintained throughout the analysis process, including coding logs, evolving code definitions, and reflective notes. This documentation ensured that coding decisions were systematic, consistent, and traceable over time. Taken together, these procedures contributed to a rigorous, transparent, and methodologically aligned thematic analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical research standards. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure anonymity, a coding system was used to replace personal identifiers, and all data were securely stored and treated confidentially. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

Table 1: Demographic Information of interviewed Teachers

Codes	Gender	Branch	Qual if.	Teaching/Admin. Experience/Years	status	Public/Private School	Region
T1	F	Chemistry	MA	23	Senior Teacher Head Master	Public	R1
T2	-	Georgian Language and Literature	-	32	Leading Teacher	Private/Public	R1
T3	M	Math	-	30	Senior Teacher/ Head	-	R1
T4	F	GLL	PhD	40	Leading Teacher	Public	R2
T5	-	Primary Educator	B. A	3	Senior Teacher/Head Master	-	R3
T6	-	History	-	12	-	-	R3
T7	M	Citizenship	MA	11	-	-	R3
T8	F	Biology	-	15	Senior Teacher/Head	-	R4
T9	M	Math	-	20	Senior Teacher/Head Master	-	R2
T10	F	Georgian Language and Literature	-	14	Senior Teacher/ Head	Private School	R3
T11	-	Citizenship	-	5	-	Public School	R5
T12	-	Chemistry	-	16	-	-	R3
T13	-	Georgian Language and Literature	-	10	-	-	R2
T14	-	Math	-	-	-	-	R6
TADM	F	Administrator/ Non-formal education instructor	MA	14	N/A	Private	R1

RESULTS

In the study, analysis was guided by Desimone's (2011) conceptual framework, which identifies key features of effective professional development (PD) and recognizes that PD occurs through both formal structures (trainings, workshops, external modules) and informal or embedded practices (co-teaching, peer discussion, classroom experimentation, online learning). To improve transparency in the analytic process, both deductive and inductive codes used to develop the themes are clearly presented here. Deductive codes were based on Desimone's (2011) framework, including content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. These codes guided the initial review of transcripts and provided an analytical structure aligned with the study's theoretical foundation. Inductive codes emerged directly from participants' stories and reflected context-specific factors influencing PD in Georgian regional schools. These included repetition or misalignment of PD content, bureaucratic burden, internal school-led PD models, technology-driven adaptation (e.g., pandemic learning), novice-teacher motivation, and disparities in PD access between private and public schools.

During coding, each interview excerpt was assigned one or more deductive or inductive codes. These codes were then grouped and compared to identify patterns across participants, ultimately leading to the four themes presented below. Including both deductive and inductive coding ensured that the analysis stayed grounded in theory while also responding to the unique contextual realities shared by teachers.

Theme One: Critical Features of Effective Professional Development

The findings from interviews with 14 teachers and one private school principal highlight key features of effective professional development (PD) that play a crucial role in enhancing teachers' skills and improving the learning experience for students. All respondents stressed the importance of PD. The teachers' perspectives during the interviews were mostly similar; therefore, the study cites only those participants who expressed their points with particular clarity. T1 emphasized that promoting a collaborative environment where teachers can share their views and ideas gained from various training sessions is extremely important. Implementing these shared insights in the classroom improves lesson quality, engages students in the learning process, and fosters their interest and participation. This approach contributes to a more enriched and effective learning experience for the students.

"It is crucial that these shared insights are actively implemented in the classroom setting, thereby enhancing the quality of lessons... Another significant objective of PD is to ensure that the methods learned during these sessions actively engage students in the learning process, fostering their interest and participation".

T3 emphasizes the main goal of professional education for teachers—promoting growth and development through various activities. These activities give teachers the chance to broaden their knowledge and skills, helping them better address the diverse needs of their students and reach educational goals. As she noted:

"By participating in these activities, teachers can enhance their ability to adapt their teaching approaches to cater to each student's individual learning style, ultimately ensuring that students grasp the subject matter as required by the educational objectives" (T3).

T4 – emphasized that reinforces the undeniable purpose of PD –

"Elevating teachers as specialists in their field and measuring their professional growth based on student outcomes and overall teaching quality ... sometimes the state sets requirements for us, while other times, we take an interest in informal development opportunities ourselves, a teacher strives for self-improvement, driven by both internal and external motivation, with heart and mind".

Highlighting this critical feature allows for continuous improvement in teaching practices and a positive impact on student achievements. T5 highlights that the teaching profession requires constant development, adaptation, and improvement over time, as to other professions.

"Providing students with quality education through effective teaching methods remains the paramount goal. PD supports this by fostering innovative teaching approaches and enhancing learning experiences... While teaching methods and environments evolve for the better, the core purpose remains the same—nurturing students' personal, spiritual, and mental growth... Sharing experiences with fellow educators during PD builds a supportive community, allowing us to continually refine our practices and ensure a seamless, high-quality learning experience."(T5)

TADM (Private School principal) advocates for a balanced approach to PD, allowing both external and internal opportunities within the school. The effectiveness of PD increases when teachers actively engage in their own growth and development, aligned with the school's specific research and needs. Relying solely on generic externally provided modules can hinder teachers' progress. Developing internal mechanisms, where teachers collaborate closely, leads to more fruitful outcomes.

TADM – "Based on my experience, I have found that when teachers actively engage in their own PD, it tends to be more effective than relying solely on externally provided training modules... I have witnessed cases where teachers are subjected to the same module for two or three consecutive years, which is highly counterproductive and absurd."

Theme Two: Teachers' Perception of Professional Development

"The design of PD experiences must address how teachers learn, as well as what teachers learn" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). PD opportunities must recognize and appreciate that teachers are adult learners with unique learning styles, diverse cultural backgrounds, and varying content-specific contexts in which they work (Buxton, 2020). Many authors (Fang et al., 2021; Zhang et al. 2015; Zhang et al., 2020) confirm that addressing teachers' PD needs is crucial for designing an effective PD program.

In the context of all teachers and private school principal, a unanimous recognition of the importance of vocational education courses is evident. However, the majority of them emphasize the need for customized and tailored training, workshops, conferences, and programs that can be directly applied in the classroom setting.

The majority of teachers and school principals have observed that existing training opportunities often do not align with their specific needs.

"The purpose of these trainings should extend beyond benefiting just teachers; they should be designed in a way that allows the knowledge and skills acquired to be effectively transferred and delivered to each student" (T6).

"Over the course of many years, I have been presented with numerous programs, and while I appreciate the effort, I must honestly admit that not all of them have consistently aligned with our developmental needs. This applies to both professional and subject-specific programs. Unfortunately, there has been a noticeable amount of repetition, resulting in a sense of stagnation without introducing any fresh and innovative approaches" (T8).

"When the system places teachers in a trial-and-error cycle or constantly tests them to prove they are "worthy" of this honorable title, requiring endless documentation to validate it, they have less time for their students. When bureaucracy, centralized control, and standardized demands dominate, consuming teachers' energy and vital resources, students are left behind the paperwork" (T10).

One noteworthy observation is the expressed concern from the principal of the private school, who highlighted the indifferent attitude of the state towards private schools. This sentiment raises awareness of potential disparities in accessing adequate PD resources for teachers in private educational settings.

"As a representative of a private school, I find myself with limited options. Regrettably, the state appears to place less emphasis on the development of individuals in managerial positions within private schools compared to teachers. Consequently, I have taken it upon myself to prioritize my own growth and PD. To achieve this, I engage in reading literature, seeking guidance from non-governmental organizations, and utilizing the services they provide, rather than relying solely on support from the Ministry of Education" (TADM).

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that novice teachers showed complete satisfaction with the proposed PD programs, signaling her eagerness to engage in opportunities that can support her growth as educator.

"All PD sessions have been highly engaging and relevant. I especially recall insightful discussions on bullying and ethnic minorities. These sessions also helped address the technical aspects of modern teaching, which requires diverse approaches" (T5)

"Every module significantly shaped my professional growth, thanks to exceptional trainers and compelling case studies. The well-structured content effectively answered my lingering questions, making a lasting impact" (T11)

Interestingly, teachers find significant benefits in engaging in mutual cooperation within the school environment, where they can share practical knowledge and experiences with their colleagues. This collaborative approach is seen as a valuable avenue for enhancing professional growth and development.

"I find the collaborative culture of teachers sharing their experiences with each other extremely beneficial. It provides me with valuable insights and enriches my own experience in the field" (T3).

Theme Three: Impact on Teaching Practices

According to Darling-Hammond et al., it is recommended that Professional Learning Development align with the learning style experienced by students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This sentiment is reflected in the feedback provided by the teachers we interviewed regarding the implementation of PD programs in practice.

"The new methods that we have learned and implemented in our classes have been well-received by the children. They particularly enjoy engaging in collaborative projects, participating in group work, and taking part in interactive projects, which create a lively and engaging learning environment. However, they are not focused and concentrated on conducting projects with high quality" (T12).

In certain instances, the school itself implements specific practices based on its internal professional experience. This was particularly noticeable in the private school, where we conducted an interview with the principal.

"At my school, we use a "critical friend" system, where teachers collaborate through lesson planning, observations, and constructive feedback. This approach is more effective than relying solely on external PD modules. Additionally, a quality development group, including administrators and teachers, observes lessons chosen by the teacher. Afterward, we discuss strengths and areas for improvement, providing

recommendations in a respectful and professional environment. This process fosters trust and has proven highly effective, as teachers respond positively to the feedback." (TADM).

An essential component of ongoing teacher PD revolves around obtaining technological competencies. Nevertheless, certain educators may experience hesitancy when it comes to embracing new technology and may voice concerns regarding the integration of Information and Communication Technologies in their teaching environments (Smeed & Jetnikoff, 2016). The study highlighted the implementation of professional practices within the school and independently organized by the school, which proved to be quite effective for teachers, especially during the pandemic.

"During the pandemic, as we navigated the shift to online teaching, we prioritized teacher training in technology and online platforms. Despite some challenges, our school achieved strong academic results, evident in the lower performance of transfer students from public schools compared to our existing students" (TADM).

The T10 teacher specifically emphasized the practice of seeking PD opportunities provided within the school rather than from external sources. One such training focused on the preparation of online presentations, which was organized by the school itself.

"The transition to online learning brought new challenges for both students and me, requiring adaptation to digital tools and virtual communication. Some students even engaged in extra activities, making the experience overall positive. As a private school, our administration provided tailored training and support. While some elementary teachers initially struggled with basic tech skills, everyone made an effort to adapt, resulting in a successful transition."(T10).

T4 highlighted that several teachers encountered challenges when trying to apply specific training into their classroom practice. The factor attributed to this difficulty was the effectiveness of coaching provided during the training sessions.

"PD opportunities exist but need improvement. When introducing complex tasks, teachers require clear guidance and support. The quality of coaching is crucial—some teachers benefited from good coaches, while others faced confusion. Proper planning and preparation are essential for successfully implementing new methods."(T4).

Unlike other teachers and school principal, T5 emphasized the significance of enhancing the effectiveness of PD programs by considering a change in their format.

"What I personally feel is that attending only lectures and trainings is not sufficient for my professional growth. I believe it would be more beneficial if trainers could come to our school and observe our lessons"(T5).

"I try my best to implement what I am taught, but having a professional trainer observe me could provide even more valuable feedback and assistance in putting everything into practice. I find this type of hands-on PD more appropriate and effective for my needs"(T11).

In contrast to other cases, this study revealed a distinct aspect in the correlation between the theoretical and practical components of PD for novice teacheres. The research found that the attitude of a novice teacheres towards PD, which encompasses not only the duration of her professional activity but also her age, sets them apart from other surveyed teachers, particularly those aged 50 and above. Notably, this novice teacheres displays significantly higher motivation and actively engages in communication with trainers. She diligently seeks to incorporate all modules that can enhance her practical skills, aiming for a more comprehensive development. Furthermore, she appreciate direct involvement of the trainer in their practical activities and value receiving recommendations to further refine her teaching approach.

Theme Four: Student Learning Outcomes

Regarding the influence of teachers' PD and its impact on students' learning outcomes, all five teachers and private school principal unanimously affirm its positive effects. However, emphasized T1 that this impact always accrues, if student is motivated and oriented on learning:

"What we learn in training, we apply in the classroom. However, true improvement in learning outcomes depends on students' interest. With most topics already covered, new training feels repetitive. Instead, supportive measures like restricting mobile phone use could improve class discipline. Still, training alone won't impact students uninterested in subjects like chemistry, who aim only for a passing grade" (T1).

The principal of the private school has also confirmed the direct correlation between teachers' PD and students' learning outcomes. However, she emphasized that the entire process concerning the PD of teachers in the her private school is a result of the active involvement of the school administration. As evidence of this connection, the principal pointed to the successful implementation of STEM education within the school. Moreover, she noted that the school provides opportunities for additional non-formal education, evident in the proliferation of various workshops and training sessions, which both teachers and students greatly appreciate and engage in more intensively. The principal's observation regarding the direct link between teachers' PD and students' learning outcomes is of paramount importance.

"The biggest challenge in teacher PD is assessment. From my experience supporting teachers across schools, this remains a common issue. Complete objectivity is difficult, as teachers may struggle to fully apply evaluation criteria, leading to persistent subjectivity" (TADM).

T2 emphasized that:

I cannot claim that all my students wholeheartedly follow my lead, but I must also reflect on my own responsibilities. Over the years, I have evolved significantly from I was a decade ago, gaining valuable experience along the way. As I continue to improve, I believe that my students should also experience some positive growth compared to previous years. These two aspects are undeniably interconnected.

The novice teacher provided exceptionally striking examples that highlighted the profound connection between a teacher's PD and the composition of the student's studies. These illustrations effectively demonstrated how the teacher's growth and improvement directly influenced and shaped their students' learning experiences and outcomes.

"During this training, I learned methods that helped a student struggling with behavior and motivation. After applying the strategies, the student's motivation and behavior greatly improved, earning recognition from both classmates and teachers. This experience reinforced my belief in the positive impact of continuous PD on teacher effectiveness and student outcomes" (T11).

The second example also revolves around an unmotivated learner.

"For two years, I struggled to engage a student who lacked interest in reading and motivation. However, after discovering a website during a training session, I introduced it to him, and it sparked his enthusiasm and active participation. His transformation amazed his classmates. He even started sending me stories and comics during the summer. This small achievement holds great meaning to me" (T4).

The research participants unanimously affirmed the positive impact of teacher professional development (PD) on student learning outcomes. However, they also acknowledged that student motivation and interest in learning play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of PD initiatives. While effective teaching practices significantly enhance student engagement and achievement, unmotivated students may not make the same progress.

DISCUSSION

This study applied Desimone's (2009) conceptual framework to examine teachers' perceptions of PD in Georgia's regional secondary schools, revealing both alignment with international findings and specific challenges within the local context. In line with global trends, teachers recognized the importance of PD for improving teaching practices and student learning outcomes. However, several structural, procedural, and contextual barriers limited its overall effectiveness, reflecting challenges noted in the literature (Eroglu & Donmus Kaya, 2021; Zein, 2017). A major issue is the centralized approach to PD in Georgia. Nationally mandated content and formats often fail to meet the unique needs of regional schools, reducing relevance and hindering teachers' ability to apply new knowledge effectively. This aligns with observations from other developing and transitional settings, where PD programs often overlook school-level realities and teacher-specific needs (Gokmenoglu et al., 2016; Kabilan & Veratharaju, 2013; Kennedy, 2016). Similarly, Zein (2017) notes that poorly tailored programs diminish knowledge gain and professional development, a point echoed by teachers' reports in this study. Another challenge is the predominantly lecture-based, exam-focused structure of PD activities. Teachers reported that sessions tend to be mostly theoretical with limited hands-on activities, consistent with research emphasizing the need for interactive, practice-based approaches (Guskey, 2002; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). The lack of follow-up support and coaching further hampers the transfer of training into classroom practice, mirroring patterns found by Eroglu and Donmus Kaya (2021) in international contexts. Teachers often participate in PD for external

reasons, such as career advancement, but continued engagement relies on internal motivation, including relevance to classroom teaching and opportunities for personal growth (Appova & Arbaugh, 2018; McMillan et al 2016).

Policy instability represents an additional barrier. Frequent reforms and inconsistencies in PD implementation create uncertainty and erode trust, a phenomenon observed in other post-Soviet education systems (Chanturia et. al., 2020; Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2015) . Such cycles prevent consolidation of prior learning and reduce the long-term impact of PD initiatives. Teachers emphasized tensions between centrally imposed requirements and school-level priorities, highlighting the importance of aligning national objectives with classroom realities, a principle echoed in TALIS (OECD, 2020).

Internal, school-based professional development (PD) mechanisms proved to be highly effective. Mentoring, peer observation, collaborative lesson planning, and reflective practice were often seen as more practical and sustainable than external workshops. These findings support Zein's (2017) and OECD's (2009, 2020) observations that ongoing, context-sensitive, and collaborative PD embedded within daily teaching promotes professional growth. Differences in teacher experience also influence participation; novice teachers tend to be more open to training, while experienced teachers sometimes view sessions as repetitive or disconnected from their expertise (Eroglu & Donmus Kaya, 2021). Equity and access further impact PD involvement. Teachers in private schools, minority-language schools, or those teaching specialized subjects reported fewer opportunities for relevant PD, highlighting structural and financial disparities discussed in the literature (Appova & Arbaugh, 2018; Bwanga, 2020). The integration of digital skills is another emerging concern, especially given remote learning challenges, but some teachers reported a lack of sufficient support for effective technological integration, echoing findings from global studies (OECD, 2020; Zein, 2017). Overall, the study shows that meaningful improvements in Georgian PD require greater contextualization, active learning, school-based support, and policy stability. Strengthening the connection between national goals and classroom realities, promoting collaborative and reflective practices, ensuring equitable access, and incorporating technological skills are essential to boosting teacher professional development. These findings align with global and regional research emphasizing the importance of continuous, interactive, and context-sensitive PD programs tailored to teachers' specific professional needs and classroom situations (Guskey & Yoon, 2009; OECD, 2020; Ventista & Brown, 2023). By addressing these challenges, policymakers and school leaders can transform PD from a procedural duty into a sustainable, practice-oriented process that genuinely improves teaching quality and student outcomes.

Limitation

While the qualitative design provided rich, contextualized insights, the findings are not statistically generalizable beyond the sample. The results should therefore be interpreted within the specific context of regional secondary schools in Georgia. Nevertheless, the study offers valuable perspectives on the factors shaping teachers' engagement with PD and provides implications for educational policy and practice.

Conclusion

In Conclusion, this study contributes to the literature on teacher professional development by analyzing the perspectives of Georgian regional secondary school teachers within Desimone's (2009) conceptual framework. While the findings confirm the relevance of key features identified in international research, they also highlight context-specific issues that call for adaptations to the model.

Three key implications emerge. First, PD in Georgia should move beyond formal certification requirements and prioritize practical, classroom-focused learning opportunities. This shift would help bridge the gap between theoretical training and teachers' everyday challenges. Second, strengthening internal, school-based PD mechanisms, including mentoring, collaborative lesson planning, and peer observation, would enhance sustainability and ownership of professional growth. Finally, policy stability and evidence-based design are essential to building trust in PD systems. Without a consistent strategic vision, PD risks remaining a bureaucratic exercise rather than a driver of meaningful educational change.

The study's limitations include its small sample size and its focus on short-term perspectives, both of which limit generalizability. Future research should incorporate larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and comparative approaches across different school contexts. Such studies could further illuminate how PD interacts with teacher agency, school culture, and student outcomes in transitional education systems. Overall, this research underscores the need for a more balanced, practice-oriented, and context-sensitive approach to teacher professional development in Georgia. By integrating theoretical knowledge with hands-on application and harmonizing external and internal PD opportunities, policymakers and school leaders can enhance the effectiveness of teacher learning, ultimately improving both instructional quality and student achievement.

Statement of Researchers

Researchers' contribution rate statement: This study was entirely conducted by the author. The researcher independently conceptualized the study, designed the methodological framework, collected and analyzed the data, and interpreted the findings. The manuscript was solely written, revised, and finalized by the author.

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