Teacher professional development in Africa

A critical synthesis of research evidence

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Summary: This study is an original synthesis of African research evidence on teacher professional development (TPD) provision in the sub-Saharan region. It provides a critical appraisal of the evidence base and identifies patterns in the actors and agendas involved in TPD initiatives; the modes and modalities of provision; and teachers' experiences and outcomes. The study takes the form of a critical interpretive synthesis (CIS) and is informed by theoretical work on decolonising education (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013) and promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI). It draws primarily on publications by African-based researchers, where our research team is largely based. The findings point to the prevalence of one-size-fits-all provision which can often undermine, rather than strengthen, the situated professional knowledge and agency of teachers. Additionally, despite the emphasis given to inclusive education and gender-responsive pedagogy as a substantive focus of TPD initiatives, we find that dominant modalities of TPD provision continue to exclude historically marginalised groups, and largely reproduce existing social inequalities along the lines of gender, rurality, dis/ability and other dimensions. Alongside these negative findings, the study also finds fertile ground for more inclusive, generative and empowering TPD in the region.

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Contents

1. Introduction

Overview of the study

There is growing understanding of the conditions and processes that can support teacher professional development (TPD), including through education technology. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) recent years have seen greater access to smartphones, connectivity and social media, and there have been efforts to capitalise on this for the purpose of TPD. Nevertheless, longstanding challenges remain for a sector which is fragmented by the 'projectisation' of education initiatives by donors and NGOs, and which provides variable professional opportunities for teachers along the lines of rurality, gender and dis/ability, amongst other factors. It is now more than a decade since previous influential studies of TPD in the region (Mulkeen 2010; Akyeampong et al. 2011). The present cutting-edge review provides an updated portrait of provision, and makes a distinct contribution through its use of frameworks for decolonising education, international partnerships and academic knowledge production (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013), and for promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in communities and institutions (GWG 2017). In applying these critical lenses, we systematically reveal patterns of domination and exclusion, as well as positive outliers, which might signal a direction for more inclusive, generative and empowering TPD in the region. This review is conducted according to the principles of 'critical interpretive synthesis' (CIS) (Depraetere et al. 2020), a methodology that allows researchers to synthesise different forms of research evidence in order to draw lessons for policy, practice and research. In line with the decolonial framing of this study, we draw primarily – if not exclusively – on the work of African-based researchers, whose publications have often been "overlooked and undervalued" (Maclure 2006, p. 80) by education policy, research and practitioner communities. Similarly, our research team is largely based in the region, with colleagues in Ethiopia (Nigusse), Ghana (Ayinselya), Rwanda (Imaniriho), South Africa (Singh) and Tanzania (David), as well as the UK (Barrett, Cortez, Mitchell, Nwako). Analysis in this CIS is conducted with particular attention to GESI. GESI is a liberal-egalitarian framework which proceeds from the assumption that gender-based disparities in social participation and outcomes are pervasive, and necessarily reproduced through social institutions unless they are explicitly acknowledged and effectively addressed (GWG 2017). The commitment to GESI is realised and extended through a decolonising framing

which goes beyond describing disparities, and towards the identification of wider social and political structures and relations which create and perpetuate entrenched inequalities. In particular, we draw on Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2013) work on the Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa which highlights pervasive inequalities in power, knowledge and being which result from structures of domination that operate at the global, national and institutional levels. The term 'coloniality' here refers to the ongoing legacies of colonialism which have extended beyond political Independence and into the 21st century. Schools and other education institutions which were integral to the colonisation of Africa have continued to create, as well as sometimes repair, social division and inequalities through the ways in which they differentially distribute opportunity and oppression along the lines of wealth, gender, rurality, dis/ability, ethnicity, political affiliation, and other dimensions. On the one hand, the critical

orientation of this study highlights many ways in which educational institutions in the region have historically been oppressive. For example, placing unreasonable demands on under-resourced and poorly-compensated teachers (Pryor et al. 2012; Tikly et al. 2024), and leading to educational experiences and outcomes which often fail to meet demands for an inclusive, good quality education, particularly for marginalised groups (e.g., Adzahlie-Mensah 2014; Uwezo 2019). On the other hand, it suggests a positive vision for education in the region which is endogenous, by which we mean it derives from a particular national context and reflects the values, knowledge and agency of teachers and others in schools and their communities (Hountondji 1997; Mitchell et al. 2022). For this reason, our study acknowledges the well-documented challenges and injustices experienced by educators in the region, while seeking out positive outliers and endogenous solutions.

Research focus and theoretical frameworks

The overarching research questions guiding this study are as follows:

RQ1: What are the dominant patterns, and positive outliers, in teacher professional development (TPD) initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade, and how might they be characterised?

RQ2: What are teachers' experiences of, and outcomes from, these initiatives?

RQ3: What strengths, gaps and limitations exist in the research evidence base, and with what implications for future research, policy and practice?

This section outlines the thinking which underpins these questions, followed by a more detailed elaboration of our research concerns in Table 1 (below). For the purposes of this study we use the term TPD to refer to: the processes through which in-service teachers develop their capacities for improved practice. How, and

by whom, 'improved practice' is defined is necessarily a political issue rather than a purely technical one. Such definitions may reflect expectations established by the profession itself through dialogue with relevant stakeholder groups – an approach described as 'democratic professionalism' (Whitty 2008). Conversely, they may reflect a 'managerial' view of professionalism, where TPD is understood in terms of compliance with rules imposed from outside the profession (ibid.). As such, TPD initiatives cannot be divorced from considerations of power, even when presented in apolitical, value-neutral terms (Tabulawa 2003). In foregrounding a concern for power relations, decolonial and GESI frameworks signal the need for TPD research to attend to the actors involved in such initiatives, their relative status and influence, as well as which, and whose, agendas they advance.

There is a well-documented tendency for international actors and agencies to assert their own agendas with respect to teachers' work in the region (e.g. Tabulawa 2003;

[1] 'Epistemologies' refers to theories of knowledge, or ways of knowing.

Mitchell & Milligan 2023). This process, and its results, can be understood using Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2013) theorisation of coloniality in the African continent. This has three dimensions:

The *'coloniality of power'* refers to arrangements which, at the global level, render African states politically and economically subordinate to Western powers, and at the national level, advance the interests of indigenous elites over those of ordinary citizens, such as teachers and students in government schools.

The *'coloniality of knowledge'* refers to the domination of Eurocentric worldviews and epistemologies[1] over alternative conceptions, in ways which devalue or override local and indigenous perspectives, values and knowledge systems, including those embedded in African languages.

The *'coloniality of being'* refers to the experience of coloniality, as reflected in the perspectives, emotions and (dehumanising) material conditions which result from the dimensions above.

For the purpose of analysis it is helpful to distinguish between these three dimensions of coloniality, although in practice they are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

The GESI framework (GWG 2017) also directs our attention towards inequitable power relations. Unless TPD initiatives attend to social inequalities with respect to gender and other correlates of exclusion, then these will be reproduced. The same is true if TPD overlooks, or fails to adequately respond to, the inequities which teachers themselves experience as gendered beings in the workplace and the wider community (Chege 2007). This draws attention not only to the content of TPD initiatives, but also to the modalities of these activities, and the extent to which their format, location and timing (etc.) is accessible to all.

In the international development sector, GESI is a widely used and powerful lens for noticing who is excluded from the benefits of development in the 'here and now', and ensuring the marginalised are prioritised in development efforts. Decolonisation frameworks, such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2013), are concerned with tracing the historical legacies and wider global geopolitical structures that create and reproduce social injustices so that these can be transformed. In the hands of African critical feminists, such as Tamale (2020), they can be used to analyse the histories and structures which underpin gender injustices and their intersections with rurality. Using these frameworks in tandem has helped us to maintain a constant focus on who is served by, and who is excluded from, TPD initiatives in the region.

The frameworks discussed above have informed an elaboration of our initial research questions, presented below.
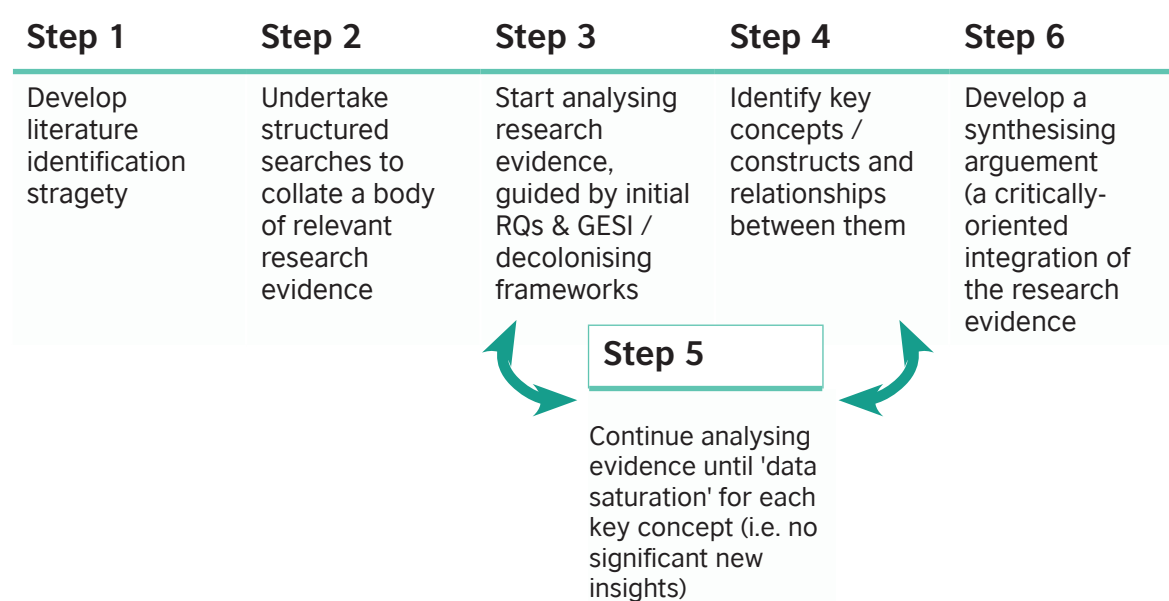
Research questions	In Detail
RQ1: What are the dominant patterns, and positive outliers, in TPD initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade, and how might they be characterised?	i) Actors and agendas involved in TPD initiatives in the region What patterns exist in the actors and agencies involved in TPD initiatives (e.g. ministries, regional/district education offices, schools, NGOs, inter/national universities, development partners, etc.)? What range of agendas or purposes are pursued through these initiatives? Which actors appear to be committed to which agendas? To what extent are these informed by teachers' priorities? To what extent do GESI and decolonising agendas appear in policy, programme and project documents? ii) Nature of TPD initiatives (modes and modalities) What are patterns and outliers in the design of TPD initiatives - in-person, online, blended? Generic or tailored to individual needs? Involving training, coaching, mentoring or other forms of professional support? Based on individual or collaborative activities? One-shot or ongoing; assessed or not; based on 'cascade' or other delivery models? Is GESI taken into account in the design of TPD initiatives?
RQ2: What are teachers' experiences of, and outcomes from, these initiatives?	What evidence is there of disparities in teachers' access to, and experiences of, these initiatives? (With a particular focus on gender, but also: rurality, ethnicity, dis/ability, political affiliation, professional experience, career level and intersectionalities between these? With respect to the above, how does this link to teachers' motivations and incentives for engaging in TPD initiatives? How/does TPD link to professional and incentive structures for teachers (e.g. compensation, accreditation, licencing) and do these take into account diversity of teachers and their workplaces? What are teachers' perceptions of the relevance, quality and management of TPD, as well as the availability and adequacy of resources to support in-service professional development?
RQ3: What strengths and limitations exist in the research evidence base, and with what implications for future research, policy and practice?	What patterns exist in the research knowledge production from the region, in terms of thematic and geographical coverage? What kinds of research have been conducted?

Study design

This study takes the form of a critical interpretive synthesis (CIS), a systematic approach to reviewing and synthesising a diverse body of research evidence for the purpose of theoretical development in an area of concern (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006; Depratere et al., 2020). CIS draws on techniques familiar in qualitative research such as the iterative collection and analysis of data, the ongoing refinement of research questions, and theoretical sampling, towards the development of a synthesising argument which can accommodate the evidence reviewed. It supports the inclusion of a broad range of research evidence because, unlike aggregative forms of systematic review (more common in the field of education), it does not require standardised units of analysis, and can incorporate qualitative and quantitative research.

Figure 1. Overview of research process

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 6
Develop literature identification stragety	Undertake structured searches to collate a body of relevant research evidence	Start analysing research evidence, guided by initial RQs & GESI / decolonising frameworks	Identify key concepts / constructs and relationships between them	Develop a synthesising arguement (a critically-oriented integration of the research evidence

Step 5

Continue analysing evidence until 'data saturation' for each key concept (i.e. no significant new insights)

Literature identification strategy

In line with the decolonial positioning of this study, the literature identification strategy foregrounded publications by researchers based in the SSA region, without overlooking key studies by researchers based elsewhere. There were four strands to the literature identification process: structured searches of 1) academic databases, 2) university repositories and 3) African Journals Online, and 4) the nomination of publications by members of the research team. Details of each strand of the literature identification, along with the number of publications yielded, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Four strands of the literature identification process

Strand 1 – Structured searches of academic databases

Search strategy: Structured search of Scopus academic database using the search term 'teacher' in combination with 'professional development', 'professional learning', 'CPD', and related terms Selection criteria:

• One or more authors based in the SSA region

• Published over the period 2010-2024

• Studies reporting on research on in-service professional development for teachers in African schools, (i.e. excluding research in other areas which draws implications or makes recommendations for CPD)

36 articles identified

Strand 2 – Doctoral theses from university repositories in the region

Search strategy: Structured search of University repositories included in OpenDOAR, a global directory of Open Access repositories Selection criteria for repositories:

• Repositories for 2 universities within each of the 5 countries represented in the team – Ghana, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania (i.e. total 10 repositories)

• Universities known for research in education

76 doctoral theses identified

Strand 3 – African Journals Online

Search strategy: Structured search (see Strand 1) within archives of online journals Selection criteria for journals:

• Two peer-reviewed journals published within each of 5 countries – Ghana, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania

• Reputation within country for high quality education research

31 articles identified

Strand 4 – Significant or landmark studies

Search strategy: Academic and grey literature publications nominated by team members Selection criteria:

• Stand out research for quality of evidence, rigour of research and/or critical insights

• Either recently published or landmark studies that have influenced debate, policy or practice

• Authored by researchers inside or outside the SSA region

57 articles identified

Analysis

For the purposes of analysis our team divided into three working groups, each tasked with conducting the initial analysis in each of the substantive areas of focus identified (see Table 1). The material collated for the CIS was treated as the sampling frame, and the working groups made selective use of these publications based on the principles of theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss 2008). Drafts of the analysis in each substantive area were shared with the wider team for inputs (Dec 2023-Jan 2024) to support the development of an overarching conceptual framework and synthesising argument, which is presented in Section 2 of the paper.

Reflections on research evidence from the region

This section provides a descriptive overview of academic research literature on TPD from the region. We identify patterns in the provenance of research, the foci/framings and methods used, and areas of strength as well as notable gaps or omissions. As shown in Table 3, we found 36 articles on TPD by African-based researchers which have appeared in Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI)-listed journals over the past decade. Geographically the coverage is patchy, with only 10 out of 48 countries represented in this dataset and large parts of West and Central Africa receiving limited attention[2]. South Africa dominates the landscape with more than half of all publications, which reflects wider patterns in education research publishing in the region (Mitchell et al. 2020). One country which ranks higher than might have been expected in that respect is Ghana, which is home to a growing body of work focused on TPD, including large-scale studies on different aspects of teachers' experiences across the country (e.g. Dampson 2021; Abakah et al. 2022).

Table 3. Articles by SSA-based researchers in SSCI-listed journals, 2013-2024

Country	# of articles
South Africa	21
Ghana	5
Ethiopia	2
Rwanda	2
Kenya	1
Malawi	1
Nigeria	1
Senegal	1
Uganda	1
Zambia	1
Total	**36**

In terms of research foci, the majority of studies centre on teachers' perspectives and experiences of formal TPD activities in general. Where specific initiatives are evaluated, these tend to be small-scale qualitative or action research studies, based on researcher-led interventions (e.g. Helmbold et al. 2021; Kahts-Kramer & Wood 2023). As we discuss below, limited research attention is directed towards GESI with respect to TPD provision; to the outcomes of TPD; and to the effects of TPD on learners (for example, in terms of learning, attendance or other measures).

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[2] The literature identification strategy did not include targeted searches of specialist French language databases, which would have yielded more publications from Francophone Africa.

2. Findings

2.1 Actors and agendas in TPD initiatives

This section identifies the key actors involved in TPD initiatives, their activities and influence, and the agendas which are pursued through such provision. In doing so, we draw particularly from national policy documents from countries represented in our research team - Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, Tanzania and South Africa. The analysis is informed by Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2013) notion of the 'coloniality of power', referring to structures and processes which, at the global level, render African states politically and economically subordinate to Western powers, and at the national level, advance the interests of indigenous elites over those of ordinary citizens, such as teachers.

The synthesising argument developed in this section is that influential actors and agendas involved in TPD initiatives reflect hierarchies of power that privilege the perspectives and priorities of those stakeholder groups furthest from the classroom, in ways which often overlook and undermine the situated knowledge and agency of teachers. Across all contexts, Ministries of Education (MOEs) are key players, establishing the rules of engagement within their jurisdictions. In instituting TPD policies, the objective of MOEs, at least ostensibly, is to improve student learning outcomes by regulating and strengthening the capacities of the education workforce. However, this can also be seen as a means of exerting social control as an end in itself, and making teachers responsible for the systemic failings which result from underinvestment and a lack of joined-up thinking in education. The influence of powerful global actors and agendas on TPD is strongly demonstrated, but with limited positive impact on the working lives of most teachers. A recurrent theme in the literature is the mismatch between TPD initiatives and the needs and classroom realities of teachers. However, we highlight evidence which departs from this general pattern.
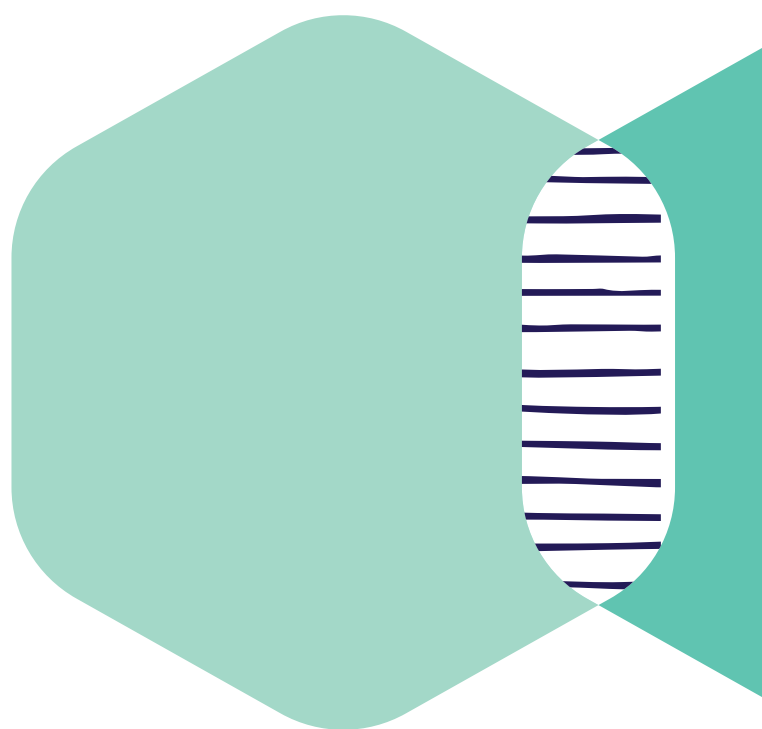
TPD and the state

The structure of education systems across the region has been characterised as bureaucratic and authoritarian (Harber & Davies 1997). As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) observes,

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"the founding fathers of African postcolonial states did not restructure inherited colonial states to make them accountable to the African people"

(p6-7).

The literature reviewed for this study depicts educational bureaucracies which concentrate power in the hands of central decision-makers who typically use compliance-based processes and one-way (top-down) accountability systems to promote alignment with government agendas (Mitchell 2017; Prew 2018; Swai 2019; Tikly et al. 2024). The last two decades have seen increased regulation around TPD, with a focus on TPD activities which are formal and documentable, in line with a growing audit culture around teachers' work (e.g. Gemeda & Tynjälä 2015).

The rise of National TPD frameworks

Over the last 20 years, TPD has achieved the status of a global education policy (Verger et al. 2012) to the point where it is unusual for MOEs not to have a formal statement in this area. National TPD frameworks exist across the region, including in Ethiopia (MoE 2009), Ghana (MOE 2020), Rwanda (REB 2019), and South Africa (DBE 2011). In Tanzania, such a policy document was introduced only recently.

The national frameworks mentioned above all identify TPD as a compulsory feature of teachers' work. They typically assert national-level priorities in terms of the focus of professional learning activities, and the time which should be dedicated to such work (e.g. 60 hours/year in Ethiopia; 80 minutes/week in Rwanda). In some contexts, teachers are required to evidence their engagement with TPD as a condition for promotion (e.g. Ethiopia, Rwanda), while elsewhere (e.g. Ghana, South Africa) all teachers must gain a certain number of 'points' from accredited courses as part of the re-licensing process. Earlier this century a World Bank-sponsored study (Mulkeen 2010) noted that teachers in Anglophone Africa had a "relatively flat career structure, with comparatively few opportunities for promotion within the classroom" (p139). While the introduction of national TPD frameworks may have been an opportunity to create more of a career 'ladder' for teachers, the blanket application of national TPD requirements does not seem to permit differentiation between teachers on the basis of their performance.

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"For many years…[TPD] initiatives have been implemented focusing on strengthening teacher's capacity…However, these initiatives have lacked always a proper mechanism for a harmonized and coordinated operational mechanism. Most of the previous [TPD] initiatives were inadequately implemented…"

(MOEST 2020, p8)

National TPD frameworks not only regulate teachers' work, but also specify the role and remit of other actors, including government institutions (e.g. colleges and universities) and non-state actors, including NGOs, private universities and international organisations. These frameworks assert government ownership of TPD. For example, "The delivery of [TPD] remains a government-managed process…[and] will be done based on approved [government] guidelines" (ibid., p19).

Topics of focus in National TPD frameworks

In terms of content, national frameworks indicate mandatory areas of focus, with varied room for locally-identified priorities. The most common focus of compulsory TPD relates to generic (i.e. non-subject specific) aspects of pedagogy, and in particular 'inclusive pedagogies', which is referenced in most policy documents. It is here, in relation to pedagogy, that GESI-related concerns are most evident. For example, the Tanzanian framework states:

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"[TPD] sessions will... emphasise Gender responsive pedagogy, inclusivity and teacher professionalism including ethics and values that promote equity and equality..."

(MOEST 2020, p13)

Similarly, all in-service teachers in Ghana must complete a course titled Education of Persons with Special Needs/Inclusive Education/Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (MOE 2020, p22). The national-level frameworks provide limited details on what the (imported) notion of 'inclusive pedagogies' means in African contexts, beyond comments such as "language which is respectful of gender and learners with impairments" (REB 2019, p12). Despite the espoused commitment to inclusive education in TPD frameworks, it is notable how little attention is paid to languages of instruction and language-supportive pedagogies, given that the use of unfamiliar languages in teaching and learning is a major exclusionary factor for disadvantaged learners across the region (e.g. Mokibelo 2016; Kuchah et al. 2022).

Other recurrent topics in TPD frameworks are: the nature of professional development itself, using ICT, subject-specific content (with limited details of what this entails), and large-scale national reforms such as the '3Rs' programme in Tanzania (MOEST 2020) and the competency-based curriculum in Rwanda (REB 2019). STEM is also identified as a priority of governments in the region, in line with the African Union's knowledge economy agenda (Gardner et al. 2018).

Compulsory TPD: teacher agency and social control

There is a growing tendency for African governments to link teachers' participation in formal TPD activities – particularly training – to performance appraisal, promotion and re-licensing processes. While training is mandatory, the extent to which teachers can exercise agency in selecting their particular courses varies by context. For example, Ghana has mandatory courses for all in-service teachers and 'demand-driven' courses which may be selected based on individual interests (NTC 2020, p34). In Ghana and South Africa TPD courses and providers are subject to formal quality assurance processes, and in the latter, this incorporates feedback from teachers themselves.

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"[The South African Council for Educators] may suspend its endorsement of an activity at any time if there is evidence from teachers' feedback that the activity or its presentation is of poor quality."

(SACE 2012, p15)

Such provision is unusual, and there is little evidence from the region of mandatory TPD activities undergoing appropriate quality checks (discussed below).

Across all the national contexts mentioned so far, authorities appear more concerned with monitoring teachers' compliance with mandatory training over their professional learning or changes in practice, as signalled by the emphasis given to portfolios, certificates of participation and other forms of paper-based evidence. Where a lack of teacher agency is combined with a lack of quality control and compliance-based monitoring, the results are particularly toxic. The national TPD programme in Ethiopia (MOE 2009) is a cautionary example of this, regarded by many teachers as a dispiriting exercise in demonstrating compliance (Gemeda et al. 2013; Gemeda & Tynjälä 2015; Taddese & Rao 2023). As Ethiopian teachers reflected,

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"Professional development is only active on paper. Practically, nothing was changed as a result of the CPD program. From the onset, the initiative was not clear. A module was prepared by the central reform planners [Ministry of Education] and sent to us for implementation... We simply were forced to accept it without having the necessary awareness and understanding of the CPD program. There was no follow-up or support for the teachers...You produced a plan and submitted a written report indicating that you have done what you planned. No one checked whether the report was true or not. So, it was the plan that was evaluated, rather than the actual work accomplished... All decisions were made at the centre...We expressed our dissatisfaction at various times, but our voice was unheard."

(Gemeda & Tynjälä 2015, p11)

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"We were not asked what we need, what skill gaps we have or, what suits our context and so on. We were all made to participate in the same professional development program that didn't address our needs."

(Ibid., p12)

The teachers in this context felt positively disempowered by the national TPD programme, which took the form of a one-size-fits-all model across subjects, phases of schooling, local conditions, and individual professional needs, priorities and concerns. As we will see, such undifferentiated TPD provision – and teachers' dissatisfaction with this – is a recurrent theme in the literature.

Universities' involvement in TPD

The national frameworks identify African universities as part of the state apparatus for TPD, and the literature provides evidence of their involvement in the design, delivery and evaluation of provision (e.g. Mogliacci et al. 2016; Nkundabakura et al. 2023). Alongside the large-scale initiatives mentioned above, the literature also shows a patchwork of provision centred around universities in the region. Much of this is small-scale in nature, reflecting the research and practice interests of individual teacher educators or their institutions (e.g. Helmbold et al. 2021; Kahts-Kramer & Wood 2023), as well as a large body of work which reflects the agendas of international agencies, to which we now turn.

TPD, international actors and agendas

Despite claims of national ownership of TPD processes (discussed above), TPD frameworks in the region show heavy involvement from international actors headquartered in the Global North. The national frameworks cited above refer to UN agencies, such as UNESCO and UNICEF, as well as donors, NGOs and various other 'development partners', including DFID/FCDO, JICA, Save the Children, USAID, VSO and VVOB. In some cases, the national frameworks themselves were developed with sponsorship or technical assistance from external agencies (e.g. REB 2019), an exception being South Africa, which has more limited access to official development assistance (ODA) (Beckman 2021).

Northern actors' involvement in national-level TPD initiatives is generally linked to policy commitments expressed in SDG 4, which is unsurprising given the coordinating function of the SDGs, and the role of these powerful agencies in formulating the global targets (Unterhalter 2019). The era has passed when national educational priorities in the region diverged significantly from inherited norms (e.g. Nyerere's 'Education for Self-Reliance', 1968), and there is broad convergence around global norms for TPD based on research and policy instruments developed in the Global North (Tabulawa 2003; Mitchell & Milligan 2023).

In terms of thematic foci, inclusive education is a major focus (discussed above), and particularly gender-responsive pedagogy. The UK government has prioritised girls' education as part of its SDG 4 commitments, and gender-responsive pedagogy and inclusive education are identified as a priority for TPD provision (Reilly 2020). Northern agencies give particular emphasis to early grade literacy and numeracy programmes. The SDGs treat student attainment in these curriculum areas as a proxy for a good quality education (SDG Indicator 4.1.1), as measured through assessment tools championed by USAID and the World Bank (Bartlett et al. 2015). In TPD initiatives which target these 'foundational' learning areas, Anglo-American agencies are typically involved in programmes "modelled after large-scale, highly prescriptive and mostly ineffective programs from the U.S. context" (Hoffman 2012, p340). Recent work in this area includes advocacy for 'structured pedagogy', which involves teacher guides with scripted lessons and prescribed activities (Piper & Dubeck 2020, p8).
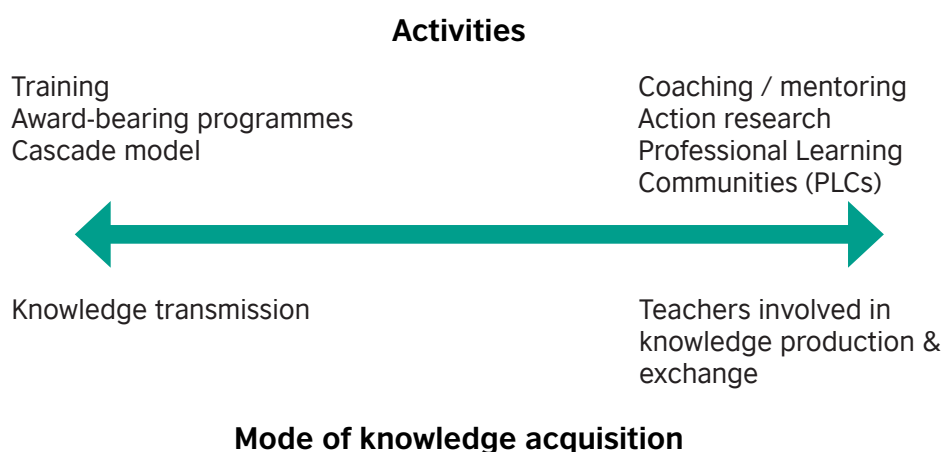
To conclude this section on the key actors and agendas reflected in TPD initiatives in the region, we note a tendency for the top-down imposition of priorities and programmes based on a managerial view of teacher professionalism (Whitty 2008), where the teacher is cast as a technician or rule-follower, based on decisions made elsewhere (Swai 2019).

2.2 The modes and modalities of TPD initiatives

This section focuses on the modes and modalities of TPD initiatives in the SSA region, the means by which these are structured and organised, and the processes through which professional learning and development occurs, or is intended to do so. An analytic framework for TPD developed by Kennedy (2005) is helpful for characterising initiatives in the region. This taxonomy includes training, award-bearing and cascade models of TPD, which are generally based on a 'transmission' mode of professional knowledge acquisition; and coaching, mentoring, action research and community of practice models, all of which give greater emphasis to teachers' knowledge and agency, and involve teachers themselves in knowledge production and exchange (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Modes of professional knowledge acquisition in TPD activities

Activities

Training
Award-bearing programmes
Cascade model

Coaching / mentoring
Action research
Professional Learning
Communities (PLCs)

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Knowledge transmission

Teachers involved in knowledge production & exchange

Mode of knowledge acquisition

Developed by the authors, from Kennedy (2005)

The evidence reviewed for this synthesis shows that a 'transmission' approach to professional knowledge acquisition overwhelmingly dominates formal TPD provision for teachers in the region. This often takes the form of one-size-fits-all training, which is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, such training usually draws on evidence and assumptions from different socio-cultural, material and policy environments, and often from Anglo-American contexts. This decontextualised knowledge is often ill-suited to curriculum and classroom realities in the region, but is privileged due to the 'coloniality of knowledge' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). Secondly, one-size-fits-all training not only reflects a deficit view of teachers' situated knowledge and concerns, but also treats teachers as disembodied, interchangeable and essentially genderless beings, which is not consistent with the commitments to GESI made in national policy documents (see 2.1). Despite the general pattern above, there is also evidence of more fertile conditions for TPD in the region, including initiatives grounded in situated and social learning theory (Lave & Wenger 1991; Eraut 1994), and those which combine school-based coaching or mentoring support with more didactic external inputs.

Transmission-based TPD: The dominance of one-size-fits-all training

Activities in the region which fall under this heading include school-based, off-site and online training in the form of lectures or seminars which may involve external actors in design or implementation, whether as one-off sessions or as part of a wider award-bearing programme. Training of this sort, which involves the transmission of centrally-approved knowledge from higher to lower tiers of the civil service hierarchy, appears to be the most prevalent form of formal TPD provision for teachers in the region (e.g. Swai 2019; Abakah 2023). Often such training is delivered through a 'cascade' model, whereby a small number of centrally-trained individuals are charged with training colleagues (generally subordinates within the civil service structure), who train others, until this training reaches classroom teachers. The inadequacies of this model are well documented, and its use in the region has been the source of much frustration for teachers (e.g. Gemeda & Tynjälä 2015; Bett 2016; Engelbrecht & Ankiewicz 2016; Sasere & Makhasane 2023).

Historically, one-size-fits-all training tended to take place off-site in cluster resource centres or other central locations, but it is increasingly common for such training to be delivered on site. Teachers in general tend to prefer this (e.g. Rugambwa et al. 2022; Sasere & Makhasane 2023), and school-based training is frequently more accessible for female teachers and other disadvantaged groups (see 2.3). Where central training is delivered online, teachers have a preference for materials which can be accessed on phones rather than laptops or other devices. In Rwanda, only 49% of female teachers (and 60% of male teachers) have access to a computer (Laterite 2023). A recent consultation of teachers in Tanzania found that most teachers neither own a laptop nor make regular use of email, which is a barrier for platforms which require email registration (Chachage & Thakrar 2023). Many teachers do own smartphones, but these are older models with limited online functionality, and the cost of data and poor connectivity in rural areas, limits their engagement with online materials (ibid.). The delivery of one-size-fits-all training is a topic of recurrent concern amongst teachers in the region, particularly where this is designed and delivered by external actors (whether from the Ministry or elsewhere) and lacks inputs from teachers themselves. A common criticism centres on communicative aspects of training. For example, for Rwandan teachers participating in an INGO-led TPD initiative, 79% of surveyed participants reported that the language of training itself was a barrier to their professional learning (Simpeze et al. 2023). Elsewhere, teachers have expressed concerns with other aspects of delivery.

For example, in South Africa:

"

"There have been occasions when the trainers and speakers are lacking basic communications skills and presentations have been long, boring and time wasting"

(Van der Merwe-Muller & Dasoo 2021, p5)

And in Nigeria:

"

"Facilitators in general training do not have sufficient information regarding the realities in the classroom. Many teachers do lose focus during training that are organised by the ministry... There should be the involvement of experienced teachers and principals in the planning and execution of such training to make it effective."

(Sasere & Makhasane 2023, p401)

We return below to the importance of involving teachers in the design and implementation of TPD provision.

TPD which involves teachers in knowledge production and exchange

With reference to Figure 2, above, a second mode of professional knowledge acquisition actively involves teachers in the construction and exchange of professional knowledge relevant to their contexts of practice. The distinction between this and transmission-based approaches discussed above, is that it capitalises on and strengthens teachers' situated knowledge and agency, and addresses local professional contexts and challenges. This may take the form of work-based coaching or mentoring, collaborative activities such as planning, problem solving, lesson study, or other forms of experience-sharing, and may be part of a formal programme introduced by governments or other actors, or initiated by teachers themselves.

The value of teachers' knowledge for TPD

One of the strongest patterns in the data is the extent to which teachers value the knowledge and experience of their peers as a basis for their own professional learning and development. Initiatives which involve experienced colleagues in design and implementation are strongly favoured, and those which lack such inputs are critiqued for that reason (e.g. Kashaigili 2021; Van der Merwe-Muller & Dasoo 2021; Sasere & Makhasane 2023). As trainers, it is teachers' capacity to link training content to classroom realities which is valued:

"

"We've had some really good trainers coming in. We had some [training] on the [curriculum assessment] documents by teachers who are actually involved in actually teaching those subjects, they had a hands-on experience. They could share their war stories from trenches as we can say....the trainers were actual teachers who taught the subject and content."

(Van der Merwe-Muller & Dasoo 2021, p6)

For similar reasons, teachers in the region welcome mentoring and coaching from senior colleagues, which may involve professional conversations, lesson observations and opportunities for feedback (Piper & Zuilkowski 2015; Cabus et al. 2020). Nevertheless, evidence suggests that these forms of professional support are quite limited outside well-funded project-based provision (Piper & Zuilkowski 2015; Uwase & Taylor 2020; Kashaigili 2021), with most teachers in the region receiving little or no such support (Amponsah et al. 2023).

Outside coaching and mentoring relationships, structured opportunities for teachers to engage in collaborative problem-solving with peers on aspects of curriculum and pedagogy is a valuable avenue for TPD, especially where this centres on subject-based communities. The extract below provides an example of such provision, as an element of an initiative for STEM teachers in South Africa:

Another example of such peer support structures as an element of a larger programme is featured in Box 1 (below). Although these examples relate to formal, funded initiatives with involvement from governments, INGOs, universities and other external actors, it is important to recognise that teachers routinely and necessarily learn from their colleagues outside such formal programmes. Indeed, professional learning largely occurs informally, on-the-job, "in the spaces surrounding [workplace] activities… [through] a combination of learning from other people and learning from personal experience, often both together' (Eraut 2004, p. 247-8).

"

"We came together as teachers from different schools. We were helping each other. A teacher would come and present his problem to the group. We would discuss the problem together, and one of us would teach the topic. As he [sic] is teaching we would identify the loopholes in his teaching and we would discuss, taking note of the problem that was raised by the teacher."

(Mokhele & Jita 2012, p579)

Increasingly, teachers are creating their own informal structures for mutual support through social media platforms. For example, a recent ethnographic study of a teacher-initiated WhatsApp group in Ghana offers insights on peer support amongst teachers in the run up to a promotion examination (Addai-Mununkum 2023). Similarly, a Facebook group created by English teachers in Kenya is fertile ground for TPD (Bett & Makewa, 2018). Despite the value which teachers evidently attach to engaging in these spaces, the professional learning which results is generally not recognised by regulatory authorities as constituting TPD, either in portfolio or points-based systems; again, this reflects the view of TPD as an auditable, compliance-based activity (see 2.1).

Box 1. Connected Learning Initiative for Teacher Education in Mathematics and Science (CL4STEM)

Actors & agendas – CL4STEM was an international project to develop and deliver blended professional development activities on STEM and inclusive education for secondary school teachers in Nigeria and Tanzania. It was a South-South partnership, led by Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai (IBBUL) in Nigeria, and the Open University of Tanzania, and funded by a Northern donor: International Development Research Centre (IDRC). CL4STEM involved African universities developing blended learning modules for teachers, which they piloted and rolled-out in their national contexts. University-based teacher educators have deep experience of teacher education and are invested in research, and CL4STEM demonstrates their potential to lead well-evidenced programmes and to share their knowledge and learning.

Modes & modalities – The CL4STEM TPD has two elements: (1) blended learning modules delivered through a Moodle-based online learning environment, which both universities were already using in their teaching; and (2) an online community of practice on the Telegram social networking app. The Telegram groups promoted peer learning between teachers, with inputs from teacher educators to support the translation of module content into classroom practice. Pilots in Nigeria and Tanzania found that most teachers used their personal smartphones and data to access the modules and the Telegram app. Engagement was slow initially, but picked up as participants learned how to access the platforms and became familiar with them.

Experiences & outcomes CL4STEM is an example of a TPD initiative which sought to evaluate participating teachers' experiences and outcomes (CL4STEM-Nigeria 2023; CL4STEM-Tanzania 2023). As a pilot study, it was exemplary in its comprehensive assessment of the initiative's impact: the research design was underpinned by an explicit theory of change, and baseline and endpoint surveys, observations and interviews were conducted to monitor changes in teachers' knowledge, attitudes and practices. Importantly, this included data on participants' gender, age, length of service (etc.), which is necessary for understanding the inclusivity of this initiative. Being a pilot, the number of participating teachers was low (around ~70 in each context). In both contexts more than twice as many males as females participated in the pilot, and evidence pointed to differential access to ICT devices along the lines of gender. Overall teachers perceived the programme to be beneficial. Across both contexts, the research demonstrated positive changes in teachers' pedagogical content knowledge but no observable changes in subject matter knowledge. The initiative was associated with positive views on the inclusion of learners with disabilities, but some evidence from Tanzania suggested a negative effect with regard to addressing gender-based disparities (e.g. p40).

Detailed reports on CL4STEM are available open access via
www.connectedlearningforstem.org

Professional Learning Communities

Incorporating many of the elements discussed already, most countries in the region have national policies for school-based TPD through a community of practice model, often referred to as a 'professional learning community' (PLC) (e.g. REB 2019; MOEST 2020). 'PLC' is an analytic term to describe schools with a learning-orientation and democratic culture of collaboration across traditional boundaries (e.g. hierarchies, occupational categories, subjects, phases). As such, schools do not become PLCs through policy directives or the kinds of compliance-based processes discussed above. Research from the region generally indicates that schools do not operate as PLCs, outside the narrow group of those receiving direct interventions from external agencies (e.g. Soares et al. 2020). For example, despite Ghana introducing national guidelines for PLCs in 2017, a recent national study found that most government schools were yet to hold a single meeting in this regard (Dampson 2021). In Ethiopia, as discussed previously, evidence points to a superficial, paper-based compliance with these guidelines (e.g. Taddese & Roy 2023).

A distinction might be drawn between structures for mutual support amongst teachers at the school-level and the previously-mentioned subject-based groups (e.g. Mokhele & Jita 2012; Bett & Makewa, 2018; CL4STEM-Nigeria 2023). The empirical evidence for PLCs, such as it is, derives principally from the Global North, and reflects organisational cultures and power differentials in these contexts (Soares et al. 2020; Taddese & Roy 2023). It may be that the hierarchical relations which are characteristic of many schools in the region (Prew 2018; Pheko & Mitchell 2023) are less conducive for TPD than more collegial relations found in subject-based communities.

Lesson study

Lesson study is a structured TPD activity involving collaborative practice-based inquiry. Originating from Japan, it involves teachers working in a team to design and teach a lesson, and monitor how it is received in the classroom. It has been used successfully at a small scale with support from university-based researchers and teacher educators (Eriksson & Osaki, 2018). Following a pilot (Haßler et al., 2015), Zambia started to roll out a national programme of Lesson Study, sponsored by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in 2012, leading to improvements to teachers' practice and student learning (Banda et al., 2014; Jung et al. 2016). Roll out, however, was not straightforward everywhere, with some teachers reluctant to engage with a time-demanding activity imposed in a top-down manner, and the need for stronger school-based support in some places (Ishida et al., 2019; Phiri 2020).

2.3 Teachers' experiences and outcomes of TPD initiatives

This section addresses teachers' experiences of, and outcomes from, TPD initiatives in the region. Here, gender-based and other social inequalities are most prominent, as a consequence of the previously-discussed hierarchies of power and knowledge which privilege the perspectives and agendas of those actors furthest from African classrooms. The ways these asymmetrical relations are experienced by ordinary citizens in the region has been described as the 'coloniality of being' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013), which highlights how these oppressive conditions are experienced emotionally and materially.

As reported above, TPD initiatives which are delivered at-scale tend to reflect the agendas of governments and international sponsors, often taking the form of one-size-fits-all training based on a 'transmission' view of professional learning, and enforced through compliance-based processes. As we see in this section, such undifferentiated provision is 'gender-insensitive' in its delivery, resulting in inequitable access to TPD opportunities along the lines of gender, rurality, and other considerations. We start by exploring the issue of access, followed by the perceived relevance and valued outcomes of TPD initiatives.

Who can access TPD?

TPD provision in the region tends to be 'gender-insensitive' in its delivery, overlooking the gendered experiences of teachers themselves. Despite much progress made towards gender equity in Africa, most women still assume traditional roles with respect to childcare and household responsibilities. For female teachers who shoulder these responsibilities, it can be a challenge to balance their personal and professional lives (Stromquist et al. 2017; Klees et al. 2017). It is then not surprising that women participate less in TPD initiatives that require after school, weekend or school holiday attendance. It is well-documented in the literature that female teachers have reduced access to TPD opportunities, for example, in Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania amongst others (e.g. CL4STEM-Nigeria 2023; Laterite 2023; CL4STEM-Tanzania 2023).

In some cases, decisions around the location and timing of TPD activities disadvantage female teachers. Off-site provision can be a barrier, as travelling is often less safe for females, particularly in rural areas with limited road and transport infrastructure (Stromquist et al. 2017). Research suggests that scheduling decisions can be more, or less, inclusive – for example, in Ghana, although more men than women participate in off-site activities, this trend is reversed for school-based provision (Dampson 2021). The cost of travel can be another barrier to teachers' participation in off-site provision, given the 'inadequate, undignified salary' of many in the region (Tikly et al. 2022, p35-6).

Decisions around the organisation of TPD necessarily involve trade-offs between the interests of different groups. For example, where TPD provision involves external coaches or trainers visiting schools, then mobility-related challenges are transferred to these groups. Research from an Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) programme in Malawi found that coaches made fewer visits to the schools which were further from their office (Slade et al. 2018).

Alongside the issues raised above, evidence from the region suggests various other characteristics associated with differential access to TPD provision. These include qualification level, favouring more qualified participants (Cheriyan et al. 2021); length of service, favouring early and mid-career teachers (Geldenhuys & Oosthuizen 2015); location, favouring teachers in urban over rural areas (Nakidien et al. 2022); and in some contexts, political affiliation, where in Ethiopia, for example, teachers affiliated to the ruling party have received favourable access to training opportunities (Berihu & Mewcha 2015). Wherever TPD is linked to wider incentive systems – whether through per diems for participating in training (Abakah 2023), or enhanced opportunities for career advancement – it is less likely to reach marginalised groups, without effective action to safeguard this. We found no evidence on access to TPD for teachers living with disabilities, but many of the issues raised above are also likely to be relevant. Similarly, in areas affected by conflict and ongoing humanitarian crises, such as Tigray in Ethiopia, there is limited evidence of teachers accessing appropriate support to respond to the trauma and devastation caused to the schools and their communities (Hagos 2023).

From a GESI perspective, recent research in the region shows a positive trend towards monitoring teachers' access to TPD by gender (e.g. Bardoe et al. 2023; CL4STEM-Tanzania 2023; Laterite 2023), as well as professional attributes (such as qualifications, years of service, location). However, it is still not uncommon for studies to overlook any such details, and we find limited or no attention to the kinds of intersectional disadvantages which are known in the region (Tamale 2020). In general, both training and research too often treat teachers as genderless and disembodied workers, whose personal identities have no bearing on their professional learning needs or access. Unless social inequalities linked to gender, dis/ability, rurality, ethnicity and other characteristics are acknowledged and addressed, they will necessarily be reproduced through TPD provision.

How relevant are TPD initiatives?

As discussed previously (2.1, 2.2), training which is developed centrally by governments or INGOs is often perceived as unresponsive to teachers' individual needs and contexts of practice. Teachers' involvement in the design and delivery of provision is key to its efficacy (e.g. Kashaigili 2021; Van der Merwe-Muller & Dasoo 2021; Sasere & Makhasane 2023), meaning that initiatives should be developed with teachers not just for teachers. Given the low value typically attached to teachers' professional knowledge and judgement, there is limited evidence of teachers being treated as active stakeholders in the development of large-scale TPD initiatives in the African continent. Where consultation does occur, it is often fairly superficial in nature, based on options determined by researchers, which fail to capture teachers' views and aspirations (e.g. Cheriyan et al. 2021). More often, consultations privilege the voice of external actors, such as district officials, university-based researchers or teacher educators. For example, the baseline analysis conducted by the CL4STEM project (Box 1) focused on the capacity of partner organisations to deliver the intervention, rather than teachers' inputs on the programme (IBUL 2022).

As indicated above, training delivered by donor organisations tends to reflect their agendas, often drawing on cascade models and a 'one-size-fits-all' approach which overlooks the varying professional experience and interests of teachers (Sayed & Bulgrin, 2020; Sasere & Makhasane 2023). For example, although unqualified contract teachers are employed in large numbers across West African countries (Harber 2017), we found no literature describing TPD focused on the needs of this group. Similarly, research on 'incentive teachers', recruited from within displaced populations, reports that the humanitarian aid organisations providing TPD did not differentiate between qualified practitioners with extensive experience in their home countries and those newly recruited to the role:

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"The NGOs do not consult with us about which training we require, and we are instructed to take such training. But it would be better to consult with us so that teachers who need the training are given priority. Some teachers have very little training."

(Head Teacher, Puntland, Somalia quoted in Sayed et al., forthcoming)

The emphasis given to the agendas of national governments and Northern-based agencies in formal TPD provision leads to important subject areas and issues being overlooked. Writing from the South African and Zimbabwean contexts, Singh and Mukeredzi (2024) argue that the omission of TPD focused on democracy, sexuality, religion, society and social cohesion presents a limiting view of teachers' work, and undermines schools as transformative spaces.

Valued outcomes of TPD: teachers' perspectives

The outcomes of TPD which teachers value may relate to positive changes in their practice or sense of professional self-efficacy. They may be material, such as career progression, promotion or financial rewards for attendance. They may also be intrinsic, such as intellectual challenge or collegial support and conviviality that comes from networking. In the literature reviewed, we found four types of research evidence on teachers' experiences of, and outcomes from, TPD:

1. Teachers' perspectives collected through survey or interviews that relied on self-report (e.g. Abakah et al. 2022)

2. Evaluation or pilot research that collected data using a range of methods, including teachers' self-report, but also classroom observations (e.g. Nakidien et al. 2022; CL4STEM-Tanzania 2023)

3. Studies that interviewed education professionals other than classroom teachers, such as headteachers or local education officials (e.g. Mthanti & Msiza 2023)

4. Literature reviews and meta-analysis (e.g. Haßler et al. 2020)

Type 1 is the most prevalent form of research, presumably because it is the least expensive to implement. We did not find any examples of research which drew on data from students as part of a methodology for generating evidence on the outcomes of TPD. Despite the wealth of research from the region, very limited attention has been given to the links between teaching practice, student learning and other outcomes, and in this respect the evidence base for TPD provision has changed little over the past decade (e.g. Orr et al. 2013, p72). We identify below the key themes in relation to the outcomes teachers value from TPD.

Extrinsic benefits

As discussed in Section 2.1, national TPD frameworks are linked to performance appraisal, promotion and re-licensing, which can be important incentives for teachers. A link between TPD and career progression is promoted as a key principle of national-level TPD initiatives (Haßler et al. 2020). However, teachers' experience in this area is mixed. One recent study of distance education programmes in Ghana reported teachers to be critical of credentialised TPD (Abakah et al. 2022). Teachers' main motivation for engaging with such programmes was to gain certificates which they hoped would open-up career opportunities; however, they often found certificated TPD was not sufficiently flexible or "tailored to their immediate needs…in the classrooms" (Ibid., p6).

The value teachers place on extrinsic benefits can depend on their salaries and experiences of poverty. Rwandan teachers interviewed for a five-country study reported that material incentives such as meals, transport allowance and financial compensation for their time mattered because their salaries were so low in comparison to other public servants (Tikly et al. 2022). Similarly, teachers in Ethiopia and Tanzania also identified as public servants and expressed discontent with

levels of pay. Across the region, primary school and early career teachers are often on lower salaries than their colleagues, and other specific groups of teachers have particularly poor remuneration as well as insecure contracts that keep them in conditions of chronic poverty. Examples of these include unqualified or contract teachers in West Africa and 'incentive teachers' recruited from within refugee camps (Sayed et al., in press).

Benefits for student learning

At a programme level, TPD is ultimately valued for its envisaged benefits to student learning. However, literature reviews and meta-analysis focused on sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Naylor and Sayed, 2014) and beyond (Thurlings and den Brok, 2017), do not find clear patterns which link TPD to student learning outcomes. Bainton et al. (2016) suggest that this may be due to the variable relevance and quality of such provision (discussed above).

Benefits for classroom practices

Teachers demonstrate a pragmatic preference for TPD which makes a noticeable difference to students' learning, is responsive to their classroom needs, and so contributes to strengthening their classroom practice (Jung et al. 2016). Several studies have monitored changes to teachers' classroom practices in areas targeted by TPD, with mixed results. The CL4STEM project to strengthen the inclusivity of science and mathematics teachers' classroom practices in Tanzania and Nigeria found overall evidence of positive changes in practices, but these findings were not uniform across their sample of around 80 teachers in each country (CL4STEM-Nigeria, 2023; CL4STEM-Tanzania, 2023, see also Box 1). More detailed research conducted on a sample of 18 teachers participating in a series of Assessment for Learning workshops for Grade 3 teachers in South Africa (Nakidien et al. 2022), found varied levels of implementation in classrooms. For teachers to change and maintain changes in their practice, it seems that repeated attempts are required. Poor working conditions, such as large class sizes and heavy workloads, can lead teachers to resist changes which are demanding of their time, as the Lesson Study research in Zambia indicated (Ishida et al., 2019; Phiri, 2020). The teachers in Nakidien et al.'s (2022) study experienced competing priorities as they juggled large classes, demanding workload, full personal lives and organisational change, such as being moved to teach a different grade or age group. The study concluded that the sustainability of desired practice change depends not just on the design of the TPD but also on these contextual factors.

Teacher wellbeing

Recent studies have highlighted the need for teachers to receive psychosocial support to ensure wellbeing during crises, such as the conflict in Tigray (Hagos 2023; Reda & Mitchell 2024) and the COVID 19 pandemic (Sayed, Singh et al. 2021). The latter study, which compared several African countries, concluded that COVID 19 amplified and illuminated existing problems that teachers were already facing such as little to no relevant professional development and little consideration of their wellbeing (see also Tikly et al. 2022). Teachers were expected to implement emergency policies without proper guidelines and in many cases had to return to schools which put teachers and their families at risk. The International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA) (2023) astutely noted that psychosocial support to promote teacher wellbeing is a critical problem in Africa, where violence and conflict are prevalent. A study conducted by IICBA in 2021 across several African countries indicated that many teachers are suffering from depression and anxiety; that male and female teachers are differentially affected by this; that teachers in rural schools suffered more than those in urban settings; and high school teachers were affected more than primary school teachers.

Intrinsic benefits

Abakah et al. (2023) found that Ghanian teachers who engaged in distance learning programmes particularly valued reading or study groups where this involved engaging with new knowledge through collegial interactions with teachers from other schools. The idea of communities of practice (CoP) and PLCs were also positively highlighted by teachers. Philander and Botha (2021) found CoPs a useful means of supporting TPD for supporting natural science teachers, with similar experiences reported by Dempsey and Mestry (2023).

3. Conclusion

Pointing towards more promising ways forward

This section starts by recapping the main findings from this study and points to more promising ways forward for TPD in the region.

The organisation of TPD tends to undermine, rather than strengthen, the situated professional knowledge and agency of teachers. To summarise the general pattern across the region, there is growing regulation of TPD in African countries and a tendency to link teachers' participation in formal TPD activities to processes of performance appraisal and re-licensing. Large-scale TPD initiatives reflect the agendas of governments and international agencies, and often involve one-size-fits-all training based on a 'transmission' view of professional learning. There is limited scope for teacher agency in the design, implementation and evaluation of large-scale initiatives, and as a result there is often a mismatch between large-scale provision and the needs, priorities and classroom realities of teachers. Even when initiatives invoke the discourse of 'transformative' professional learning, the application is often superficial in nature, for example, establishing the form of a professional learning community (e.g. using WhatsApp) but without engaging teachers in decision-making. While teachers attach particular value to collaborative, practice-oriented professional development opportunities, national TPD frameworks do not recognise such activities for

the purposes of career advancement. Rather, TPD systems are oriented towards monitoring teachers' compliance with mandatory training, over professional learning or changes in practice. Indeed, there is scant evidence which links teachers' participation in formal provision and students' experiences or outcomes.

The situation described above reflects a social control agenda which is supported by colonial hierarchies of power and knowledge that actively limit the capacity of teachers to contribute to the development of their profession.

Despite the emphasis given to Gender Equality and Social Inclusion as a focus of TPD initiatives, provision reproduces social inequalities. GESI is an expressed priority of African governments and international donors and a compulsory element of national TPD frameworks across the region. However, the organisation of TPD provision itself tends to be 'gender-insensitive', taking a 'one-size-fits-all' approach which treats teachers as genderless, interchangeable workers. When provision is arranged at the convenience of the powerful, without consideration for the preferences and needs of less privileged groups, it is exclusionary rather than inclusive. This is demonstrated in differential access to TPD activities across the region along the lines of gender and rurality. Equitable access to TPD opportunities requires turning existing norms on their head, and designing and developing provision for and with the most marginalised groups.

In line with policy commitments, African research on TPD shows increased attention to GESI-related issues, for example, collecting evidence on teachers' access to provision by gender and location; but this does not extend to other known correlates of exclusion, such as disability and living in conflict-affected areas. Furthermore, GESI frameworks overlook the professional dimensions of diversity, such as teachers' specialisms (by subject, grade or the needs of the learners they work with), qualifications, or career stage, unless purposefully adapted for TPD.

Ways forward: Mobilising teachers' knowledge and agency. If the findings above present a bleak picture of inadequate and inequitable provision, then African research evidence also indicates positive lessons for policy and practice. Teachers welcome opportunities for professional development where these are relevant to their needs, experience and classroom realities; involve learning from and with senior colleagues; and are demand-led, rather than compulsory, taking an asset-based view of teachers' knowledge and agency. Teachers must be active stakeholders in the development of their profession and in solving the educational and social problems that impinge on their classrooms. Addressing the inadequacies and inequities of TPD provision requires teachers' active involvement in education debates and decision-making, particularly those from, and those serving, historically marginalised groups.

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