

Growing as Educators: Narratives of Elementary Teachers Pursuing Professional Development Amidst Geographical Challenges

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Abstract. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the narratives of elementary teachers in the Pigcawayan East District, Pigcawayan, Cotabato, who pursued professional development while teaching in geographically isolated or “last-mile” schools. Ten (10) purposively selected teachers from five public elementary schools participated in semi-structured interviews, and data were analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that teachers experienced dual responsibilities and geographical constraints, including long travel distances, heavy workload, financial limitations, weak internet connectivity, and limited access to resources, which were compounded by emotional fatigue and work–study–family imbalance. Despite these challenges, teachers applied context-based learning, translating graduate-level studies into localized, learner-centered classroom practices. Teachers also reported emotional strain and resilience, marked by stress and isolation but sustained by commitment to learners. To cope, they employed adaptive strategies such as peer collaboration, bayanihan practices, offline learning, time management, and cost-sharing arrangements. Moreover, the findings indicated a transformation in professional identity, in which teachers became more reflective, collaborative, and advocacy-oriented practitioners. Professional development was experienced as both challenging and transformative, strengthening instructional practice and professional commitment. The study emphasized the need for flexible, accessible, and context-responsive professional development programs for teachers in geographically challenged areas, contributing to improved educational equity and supporting Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education.

KEY WORDS

1. professional development 2. teacher narratives

3. phenomenological study 4. last-mile schools 5. Pigcawayan East District

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1. Introduction

Professional development is widely recognized as essential to teacher quality, instructional improvement, and educational equity. For educators in remote or “last-mile” schools, however, the pursuit of advanced study and continuous learning is complicated by physical distance, limited digital infrastructure, and the financial burden of further education. Globally, while systems incentivize advanced certification, the personal sacrifice and extraordinary dedication required of teachers in isolated contexts remain underexplored, revealing a tension

between the push for higher qualifications and the practical realities of teaching in isolation (Westbrook, 2022).

Innovations in blended and distance learning have emerged as responses to these barriers, yet access is uneven. Teachers in geographically challenged areas often lack structured training, reliable connectivity, and sufficient learning materials (Reyes, 2022), and they address these gaps through self-directed learning, peer collaboration, and resourcefulness (Santos, 2023). Geographical conditions thus shape not only how teachers access professional growth but also how they sustain it (Villanueva, 2024).

The experience of professional development is also emotional and psychological. Educators report stress, exhaustion, and pressure arising from overlapping responsibilities and long travel distances, yet they persist because of their commitment to improving learner outcomes (Torres, 2023). Emotional resilience and intrinsic motivation play decisive roles in helping teachers overcome such hardships (Mercado, 2022), underscoring the affective dimension of professional growth in isolated contexts.

At the same time, professional development can be transformative. Continuous learning strengthens teachers' confidence, classroom management, and decision-making (Lopez, 2023), enhances problem-solving and reflective practice (Rivera, 2024), and fosters awareness of the need for equitable access that leads teachers toward advocacy (Cruzado, 2024). Collabo-

ration through professional learning communities further deepens instructional understanding and encourages innovation, even amid isolation (Navarro, 2024; Estrella, 2023).

In the Pigcawayan East District of Pigcawayan, Cotabato, teachers across five geographically dispersed elementary schools balance the mandates of the Learning Action Cell (LAC) and the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST) with the demanding personal undertaking of graduate study. The dispersion of these schools complicates travel for university obligations and limits opportunities for in-person study with peers, intensifying an already difficult dual role.

A significant gap exists in understanding how these teachers navigate this dual role — how they integrate academic theory with daily practice, manage time and resources, and draw on formal or informal support systems. This study documents that grassroots resilience and the innovative coping strategies of these educators. Specifically, it sought to answer: (1) What are the lived experiences of elementary teachers in pursuing professional development amidst geographical challenges? (2) How do elementary teachers cope with the challenges and achieve meaningful professional growth? (3) What insights have these teachers gained from their professional development experiences that have shaped their teaching philosophy and classroom practices?

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences and narratives of elementary teachers pursuing professional development amidst geographical challenges. Phenomenology was appropriate for capturing the essence of teachers' experiences and the meanings they

attached to their professional growth within authentic educational settings (van Manen, 2023). By focusing on lived realities, the design surfaced both shared patterns and unique insights into resilience, adaptive strategies, and continuous learning (García & Li, 2024).

The participants were ten (10) elementary

teachers selected through purposive sampling from five public elementary schools in the Pigcawayan East District. Inclusion criteria required at least five years of teaching experience, a current assignment in a geographically challenging or last-mile school, and demonstrated engagement in professional development activities. The sample size aligned with phenomenological guidelines that prioritize depth and richness of data over numerical representation (van Manen, 2023).

The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide composed of open-ended questions aligned with the phenomenological approach. Interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language (English or Filipino), audio-recorded with consent, and each lasted 45–60 minutes. A supplementary open-ended questionnaire supported data collection for participants with limited availability, and field notes captured non-verbal cues and contextual observations (Nguyen & Sim, 2024; Anderson, 2024).

Data gathering relied on in-depth interviews supplemented by written questionnaires and document review, including professional development plans and reflection journals. Follow-up clarifications ensured the depth and accuracy of responses. The researcher served as the primary instrument, establishing rapport, prac-

ticing reflexivity, and co-constructing meaning with participants while keeping their voices central (Priestley et al., 2024; García & Li, 2024).

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2023) thematic analysis within van Manen's (2023) phenomenological framework. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and combined with field notes. Open coding captured key ideas, which were grouped into categories through constant comparison across participants, and themes were then developed to represent how teachers made sense of their experiences. Repeated review, peer debriefing, and adviser consultation refined the themes and strengthened credibility and dependability (Chen & Wang, 2023; Saldaña, 2023).

The study adhered to established ethical standards, securing informed consent in both English and Filipino and emphasizing voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without consequence. Pseudonyms protected participants' identities, and all data were securely stored in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Trustworthiness was pursued through prolonged engagement, member checking, peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, and thick description, addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 2020; Korstjens & Moser, 2021).

3. Results and Discussion

The findings are presented according to the three research questions. Three thematic tables summarize the emergent themes, core ideas, and significant narratives. Participant narratives are presented in their original Filipino with English

translations to preserve authenticity, and the discussion interprets the themes in relation to the literature on teacher resilience, situated learning, and professional agency.

3.1. *Lived Experiences of Teachers in Professional Development Amidst Geographical Challenges*

Table 1. The Lived Experiences of Teachers in Professional Development Amidst Geographical Challenges

Emergent Themes	Core Ideas	Significant Narratives
Dual Responsibilities and Geographical Constraints	Balancing teaching duties and graduate studies	“... Ang paglalakbay ay... mabigat. Dalawang beses sa isang buwan, bumibiyaha ako ng 4 na oras papunta sa unibersidad sa lungsod para sa weekend classes...” (The journey is... heavy. Twice a month, I travel for 4 hours one way to the city university for weekend classes...) (IDI, P1)
	Heavy workload and administrative tasks	“... Ang aking karanasan ay isang palaging laban sa pagitan ng oras, teknolohiya, at pamilya...” (My experience is a constant battle between time, technology, and family...) (IDI, P8)
	Travel distance and isolation	“... Ang pagiging pipiliin na dumalo sa isang seminar sa lungsod ay parehong karangalan at pabigat...” (Being chosen to attend a seminar in the city is both an honor and a burden...) (IDI, P5)
	Financial and logistical limitations	“... Ang logistics ang bangungot... Tinimbang mo ang sertipiko laban sa gastos ng iyong pamilya...” (Logistics are the nightmare... You weigh the certificate against your family’s needs...) (IDI, P6)
Context-Based Learning Integration	Weak internet and limited access to resources	“... Ang aking pananaliksik ay tungkol sa paggamit ng mga lokal na alamat... Ngayon, nakikita ko ito bilang natatanging konteksto...” (My research is on the use of local folktales... I now see it as a unique context...) (IDI, P7)
	Emotional fatigue and guilt	“... Ang pinakamalalim na pag-unawa ay ang pagkamalikhain ay hindi tungkol sa kagamitan... kundi sa konteksto ng mga mag-aaral...” (Innovation is not about tools but learners’ context...) (IDI, P10)
	Applying graduate learning in classroom practice	“... Ang aking pang-unawa ay ang kadalubhasaan ay hindi lamang nangagaling sa labas...” (Expertise does not only come from outside...) (IDI, P2)
	Using local context in instruction and research	“... Kapag natutunan ko ang bagong estratehiya sa pagbasa, nagliliwanag ang mga mata ng aking mga estudyante...” (When I learn a new reading strategy, my students’ eyes light up...) (IDI, P1)
Emotional Strain and Resilience	Linking theory to real classroom situations	“... Ito ay isang gawain ng matinding determinasyon... Ang ‘last mile’ ay pakiramdam na isang marathon na tinakbo mag-isa sa dilim.” (It is an act of sheer will... The ‘last mile’ feels like a marathon run alone in the dark.) (IDI, P3)
	Improving instruction through academic work	“... Nakakabigo ngunit nakakabusog... Mabagal, nakahiwalay, ngunit ito ay pag-unlad.” (Frustrating but fulfilling... slow, isolated, but it is progress.) (IDI, P4)
	Advocacy through research evidence	“... May mga araw na pakiramdam ko ay wala akong ginagawang maayos...” (There are days when I feel I am not doing anything well...) (IDI, P9)
		“... Ang pagod ng biyahe ay nawawala kapag nakikita ko ang pagkatuto ng aking mga estudyante...” (Travel fatigue disappears when I see my students learning...) (IDI, P1)

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Table 1 continued

Emergent Themes	Core Ideas	Significant Narratives
Professional Identity Transformation	Shift to lifelong learner-researcher identity Development of reflective practice Collaborative and shared learning mindset Redefinition of expertise and leadership Increased agency and professional voice	“... Ang tunay na ‘development’ ay nangyayari pagkatapos ng opisyal na sesyon...” (Real development happens after the official session...) (IDI, P2) “... Natutunan ko na ang propesyonal na paglago ay hindi isang nag-iisang paglalakbay...” (Professional growth is not a solo journey...) (IDI, P5) “... Ngayon ay naiintindihan ko na ang pamumuno ay paglilingkod mula sa loob ng paghihirap...” (Leadership is service from within the struggle...) (IDI, P3) “... Ang pinaka-advanced na propesyonal ay ang nakauunawa sa konteksto ng mga mag-aaral...” (The most advanced professional understands learners’ context...) (IDI, P10)

Table 1 shows that the lived experiences of teachers were defined first by dual responsibilities and geographical constraints. Teachers consistently described the difficulty of balancing classroom teaching, administrative work, graduate studies, and family obligations while coping with distance from training centers, unstable connectivity, and financial limitations. As P1 and P8 conveyed, isolation and weak internet force teachers to schedule learning around travel and connectivity, while P5 framed development opportunities as “both an honor and a burden,” and P6 weighed certificates against family needs. These accounts align with Smith (2023) and Johnson (2022), who found that remote educators experience substantial difficulty advancing academically yet demonstrate notable resilience and adaptability.

A second experience, context-based learning integration, showed teachers translating graduate study into localized classroom practice. Knowledge became meaningful when grounded in learners’ realities, as P7 illustrated by using local folktales in research and P10 by locating innovation in learners’ context rather than sophisticated tools. P2 emphasized that expertise is co-constructed among teachers, and P1 observed the immediate instructional impact of contextualized reading strategies. These find-

ings echo Garcia (2022) and Reyes (2024), who linked active engagement in graduate study and contextual application to stronger instructional responsiveness.

A third dimension, emotional strain and resilience, revealed exhaustion, isolation, and self-doubt alongside persistence. P3 described the “last mile” as “a marathon run alone in the dark,” P4 as “frustrating but fulfilling,” and P9 voiced moments of inadequacy. Yet P1 found renewal in seeing students learn. Consistent with Torres (2023), Lee (2022), and Mercado (2022), emotional fatigue is common in isolated settings, but resilience and intrinsic motivation enable teachers to persist.

Finally, professional identity transformation emerged as teachers shifted from viewing themselves as classroom instructors toward becoming reflective practitioners, collaborative learners, researchers, and advocates. P2 located real development beyond formal sessions, P5 described growth as a collective journey, P3 redefined leadership as “service from within the struggle,” and P10 equated advanced expertise with understanding learners’ contexts. These narratives support Lopez (2023) and Rivera (2024), who found that continuous learning strengthens reflective practice, confidence, and professional agency.

3.2. Adaptive Strategies and Coping Mechanisms for Professional Growth

Table 2. The Adaptive Strategies and Coping Mechanisms for Professional Growth

Emergent Themes	Core Ideas	Significant Narratives
Collaborative Support and Shared Learning	Peer collaboration and support systems	“... Kami ang aming sariling maliit na aklatan at grupo ng suporta.” (We are our own little library and support group.) (IDI, P1)
	Shared resources and collective learning	“... Ang pinaka-praktikal na solusyon ay nilikha nang sama-sama sa aking mga kapwa guro...” (The most practical solutions are co-created with fellow teachers...) (IDI, P2)
	Bayanihan and mentoring practices	“... Kami ay nakakatagal sa pamamagitan ng bayanihan...” (We cope through bayanihan...) (IDI, P5)
	Collegial problem-solving and learning exchange	“... Gumawa rin kami ng simpleng ‘worry jar’... upang lutasin nang sama-sama.” (We created a simple ‘worry jar’ to solve problems together.) (IDI, P9)
	Professional learning through teamwork	
Adaptive Resourcefulness and Flexible Learning Strategies	Offline and asynchronous learning practices	“... Mayroon akong external hard drive na tinatawag kong ‘PD in a box.’” (I have an external hard drive called ‘PD in a box.’) (IDI, P4)
	Flexible scheduling and time management	“... Nakikipagsosyo ako sa isang guro mula sa ibang paaralan upang maghati sa gastos ng biyahe...” (I partner with another teacher to share travel costs...) (IDI, P6)
	Resource maximization despite limitations	“... Sinulat ko ang aking mga post... nang offline sa loob ng isang linggo.” (I write my discussion posts offline for a week.) (IDI, P8)
	Practical budgeting and cost-sharing strategies	“... Gumagamit ako ng mahigpit na iskedyul na may kulay...” (I use a strict color-coded schedule...) (IDI, P3)
	Independent and self-directed learning	
Resilience, Motivation, and Professional Commitment	Emotional resilience and perseverance	“... Ang aking emosyonal na katatagan ay tumutulong sa akin...” (My emotional resilience helps me...) (IDI, P3)
	Commitment to continuous professional growth	“... Ito ay mabagal at nakahiwalay, ngunit ito ay pag-unlad.” (It is slow and isolated, but it is progress.) (IDI, P4)
	Persistence despite stress and fatigue	“... Ang dobleng responsibilidad ay napakabigat, ngunit ang pakiramdam ng tungkulin ang nagpapanatili sa akin.” (The dual responsibility is overwhelming, but the sense of duty keeps me going.) (IDI, P5)
	Sense of duty and responsibility	“... ipinapaalala ko sa aking sarili ang pangmatagalang layunin.” (I remind myself of my long-term goal.) (IDI, P8)
	Reflective and intentional learning	

Table 2 shows that teachers sustained professional growth through collaborative support and shared learning. Through peer collaboration, shared resources, mentoring, and bayanihan, teachers built support systems that addressed both instructional needs and emotional encouragement. P1 described teachers as “our own little library and support group,” P2 emphasized co-created solutions, P5 highlighted bayanihan, and P9 described a collaborative “worry jar.” These practices align with Mendoza (2023) and Balderas (2024), who found that professional learning communities strengthen teacher support and collective problem-solving in geographically challenged settings.

Adaptive resourcefulness and flexible learning strategies formed a second coping pattern.

Teachers used offline and asynchronous methods, flexible scheduling, practical budgeting, and cost-sharing to continue learning despite unstable connectivity and limited funds. P4’s “PD in a box,” P6’s travel cost-sharing, P8’s offline batching of discussion posts, and P3’s color-coded scheduling all reflect strong self-regulation. These findings support Gonzales (2023) and Mendoza (2022), who noted that teachers in remote areas develop flexible routines to overcome distance-related barriers.

Resilience, motivation, and professional commitment completed the coping repertoire. Teachers drew on emotional resilience, a sense of duty, and long-term goals to persist amid fatigue and competing obligations. P3 underscored discipline, P4 framed progress as slow

but real, P5 cited duty as sustaining, and P8 invoked long-term goals to manage stress. Consistent with Santos (2024) and Medina (2023), intrinsic motivation and commitment to life-long learning strengthen teachers' persistence in overcoming institutional and geographical challenges.

3.3. Professional Insights and Transformative Learning

Table 3. The Professional Insights and Transformative Learning

Emergent Themes	Core Ideas	Significant Narratives
Reflective and Contextualized Teaching	Reflective and intentional teaching practices	"... Ang aking pagtuturo ay hindi na lamang tungkol sa paghahatid ng mga aralin; ito ay tungkol sa pag-unawa at pagdodokumento kung ano ang gumagana dito." (My teaching is no longer just about delivering lessons; it is about understanding and documenting what works here.) (IDI, P1)
	Applying learning based on classroom realities	"... Hindi lang ako kumukuha ng PD; hinahanap ko kung ano talaga ang may kaugnayan..." (I do not just consume PD; I search for what is truly relevant...) (IDI, P4)
	Understanding learners' context and needs	"... Ang pinakamalalim na pang-unawa ay ang pagkamalikhain ay hindi tungkol sa kagamitan; ito ay tungkol sa konteksto ng mga mag-aaral..." (The deepest insight is that creativity is not about tools; it is about learners' context...) (IDI, P10)
	Translating theory into meaningful practice	
	Continuous cycle of learning and reflection	
Collaborative Professional Growth	Shared learning and bayanihan practices	"... Ang pinakapraktikal na solusyon ay nilikha nang sama-sama ng aking mga kapwa guro..." (The most practical solutions are co-created with my fellow teachers.) (IDI, P2)
	Professional growth through collaboration	"... Ang paraan ng bayanihan ay nagpakita sa akin na lumalago kami nang mas malakas kapag sama-sama." (The bayanihan way showed me that we grow stronger together.) (IDI, P5)
	Community involvement in teaching and learning	"... Natutunan ko na ang pinaka-natatag na propesyonal na paglago ay intergenerational..." (I learned that the most enduring professional growth is intergenerational...) (IDI, P9)
	Intergenerational mentoring and knowledge sharing	
	Collective problem-solving and support systems	
Leadership and Advocacy	Leadership rooted in lived experiences	"... Ngayon ay naiintindihan ko na ang pamumuno ay paglilingkod mula sa loob ng paghihirap..." (I now understand leadership as service from within the struggle.) (IDI, P3)
	Advocacy for equitable professional development	"... Ako ay naging tagapagtaguyod ng pantay na pag-access sa propesyonal na pag-unlad..." (I became an advocate for equitable access to professional development.) (IDI, P6)
	Redefinition of expertise and professional identity	"... Ang pinaka-advanced na propesyonal ay ang nakauunawa sa konteksto ng mga mag-aaral..." (The most advanced professional understands learners' context...) (IDI, P10)
	Increased professional voice and agency	
	Commitment to educational improvement	

Table 3 indicates that professional development produced lasting insights, beginning with reflective and contextualized teaching. Teachers came to see instruction as meaningful when grounded in learners' contexts and real classroom conditions. P1 reframed teaching as understanding and documenting "what works here," P4 sought out genuinely relevant development, and P10 located the deepest insight in learners'

context rather than tools. These views align with Padilla (2022) and Estrada (2023), who described teaching in challenging contexts as a lifelong, reflective process, and with UNESCO (2023) on learner-centered practice in resource-limited environments.

Collaborative professional growth formed a second insight. Teachers attributed their development to shared learning, bayanihan, and

intergenerational mentoring rather than solitary effort. P2 emphasized co-created solutions, P5 described growing “stronger together,” and P9 valued intergenerational knowledge sharing. This collective orientation supports the view that sustained professional learning is socially constructed and reinforced through community, consistent with the study’s findings on peer support as both a learning and emotional coping mechanism.

Leadership and advocacy constituted a third

insight. Experiences of hardship and limited access prompted teachers to redefine expertise and become advocates for equitable professional development. P3 described leadership as “service from within the struggle,” P6 became an advocate for equitable access, and P10 grounded advanced expertise in understanding learners. These narratives reflect Cruzado (2024) and Rivera (2024), who linked sustained professional learning to advocacy, reflective decision-making, and professional agency.

3.4. *Integrative Discussion*

Across the three research questions, a coherent pattern emerges: teachers in last-mile schools experience professional development as a demanding yet transformative journey shaped by geographical constraint, emotional labor, and professional commitment. Their lived experiences reveal persistent tension between the aspiration to grow and the realities of distance, cost, connectivity, and workload, while their coping mechanisms convert these constraints into occasions for collaboration, resourcefulness, and resilience.

The findings show that professional development is simultaneously cognitive, emotional, and relational. It is cognitive in the translation of graduate learning into contextualized instruction; emotional in the strain and resilience teachers navigate; and relational in the bayani-

han, mentoring, and shared learning that sustain them. This integration explains why hardship did not merely impede growth but also catalyzed a transformation in professional identity, moving teachers toward reflective, collaborative, and advocacy-oriented practice.

For educational management, the central implication is that professional growth in geographically challenged contexts cannot be separated from systemic support. When teachers compensate for institutional gaps through personal sacrifice and informal networks, the burden falls disproportionately on individuals. Recognizing teachers as active knowledge producers, and formalizing the collaborative structures they have improvised, would make professional development more equitable, sustainable, and responsive to last-mile realities.

4. **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The study concluded that elementary teachers in the Pigcawayan East District experience professional development as a complex undertaking shaped by dual responsibilities and geographical constraints, including long travel, heavy workload, financial limitations, weak connectivity, and limited resources. These conditions generate emotional fatigue and difficult trade-offs, yet teachers persist, translating

graduate learning into contextualized, learner-centered practice.

It further concluded that teachers cope through collaborative support and shared learning, adaptive resourcefulness and flexible strategies, and resilience grounded in duty and long-term purpose. These mechanisms allow continuous learning to proceed despite isolation and scarce institutional support, demonstrating

that meaningful professional growth depends on both individual agency and collective effort.

Finally, the study concluded that professional development is transformative, reshaping teachers into reflective, contextually respon-

sive, collaborative, and advocacy-oriented professionals. Their insights affirm that expertise is rooted in understanding learners' contexts and that leadership can be understood as service arising from lived struggle.

4.1. Implications and Recommendations

For schools and the Department of Education, the findings imply the need for flexible, accessible professional development — including hybrid, modular, and localized training — that accounts for distance, travel constraints, and workload. Graduate education support should include travel subsidies, connectivity allowances, and workload-consideration policies to reduce the burden on teachers pursuing advanced studies.

School administrators should institutionalize school-based professional learning communities to formalize the peer mentoring, bayanihan, and shared learning that teachers already practice informally. Teacher wellbeing programs, including stress management and work-

load monitoring, should accompany these structures to address emotional fatigue, recognizing that professional growth is an emotional as well as a cognitive process.

Education stakeholders should strengthen digital infrastructure and resource access in geographically isolated areas so that teachers can meaningfully participate in online and blended learning. Professional development content should emphasize contextualized teaching, reflective practice, and research-based instruction aligned with classroom realities. Finally, professional development tasks should be formally recognized in workload computation to reduce overreliance on individual coping.

4.2. Limitations and Future Directions

The study was limited to ten purposively selected elementary teachers in five public schools within the Pigcawayan East District. As a qualitative phenomenological inquiry, its findings emphasize depth and meaning rather than statistical generalization and should be read as context-bound descriptions transferable only to settings with similar geographical, institutional, and resource conditions.

The study relied on self-reported narratives gathered through interviews and supplementary questionnaires, which, while rich, may be shaped by memory and personal interpretation. It also centered on teachers' perspectives; future

research may include school heads, supervisors, families, and learners to provide a fuller account of how professional development is supported and experienced.

Future studies may extend this inquiry by comparing professional development experiences across districts, school sizes, and degrees of geographical isolation, or by examining the long-term impact of geographically constrained professional development on teacher performance, retention, and learner outcomes. Such work can strengthen the evidence base for flexible, equitable, and context-responsive professional development policy.

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