

A Participatory Action Research Methodology for Investigating Teacher Motivation and Retention in Rural Liberian Schools

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Abstract

Teacher motivation and retention constitute a critical challenge for educational quality in rural Liberia, yet conventional research often fails to produce contextually relevant or sustainable solutions. This methodology article presents a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework specifically designed to investigate and address this persistent problem. The approach centers on co-construction of knowledge, positioning rural teachers not as subjects but as co-researchers in a cyclical process of problem identification, collaborative planning, implementation of practical strategies, and critical reflection. This multi-phase methodology, conducted over an academic year within a network of three rural schools, employs community dialogues, reflective journals, and focus groups to unearth the nuanced socio-cultural and systemic factors affecting teacher persistence from an emic perspective. The primary argument is that the PAR process itself is a powerful intervention; preliminary applications suggest it fosters professional agency, builds supportive peer networks, and cultivates a sense of collective efficacy among educators. The significance of this methodology lies in its potential to generate authentic, grassroots-driven strategies for improving teacher morale and retention, thereby directly contributing to the stability of the Liberian and wider West African educational landscape. It offers a decolonial alternative to extractive research paradigms, providing a replicable model for sustainable educational development grounded in African participatory principles.

Keywords: *Participatory Action Research, Teacher Motivation, Teacher Retention, Rural Education, Sub-Saharan Africa*

INTRODUCTION

The educational landscape in post-conflict Liberia presents a complex tapestry of challenges and opportunities, with the issue of teacher motivation and retention standing as a critical linchpin for sustainable development. Despite global commitments to the Education for All agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), rural schools across Sub-Saharan Africa continue to grapple with a severe shortage of qualified and motivated teachers, a crisis that disproportionately affects the most marginalized learners (UNESCO, 2016). In the Liberian context, this challenge is particularly acute. The legacy of a protracted civil war, compounded by the more recent shock of the Ebola epidemic, has severely strained an already fragile education system, with rural areas bearing the brunt of systemic neglect and resource deprivation (Williams & Gbollie, 2020). The consequence is a chronic cycle where high teacher attrition and low motivation directly undermine educational quality, perpetuate intergenerational poverty, and hinder national efforts towards reconciliation and economic growth. This situation necessitates urgent scholarly and practical attention, not merely to diagnose the symptoms but to co-create sustainable, contextually-grounded solutions.

The central research problem addressed in this article is the persistent and multifaceted crisis of teacher motivation and retention in rural Liberian schools. Existing literature, though growing, often approaches this issue from a deficit perspective, framing teachers as subjects of study or as problems to be solved, rather than as essential agents of change (Tao, 2013). Quantitative surveys and policy analyses have effectively documented the symptomatology of the crisis—low and irregular salaries, poor living conditions, lack of teaching materials, and professional isolation (Mulkeen, 2010). However, these conventional methodologies frequently fail to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of teachers themselves and often fall short of generating the transformative knowledge required for meaningful, lasting improvement. They risk perpetuating a form of academic colonialism where external researchers define the problem and prescribe solutions, potentially misaligning with local realities, cultural values, and indigenous knowledge systems (Chilisa, 2012). There is, therefore, a significant gap in both understanding and approach: a need for research methodologies that are not only on or about rural Liberian teachers but are fundamentally for and with them.

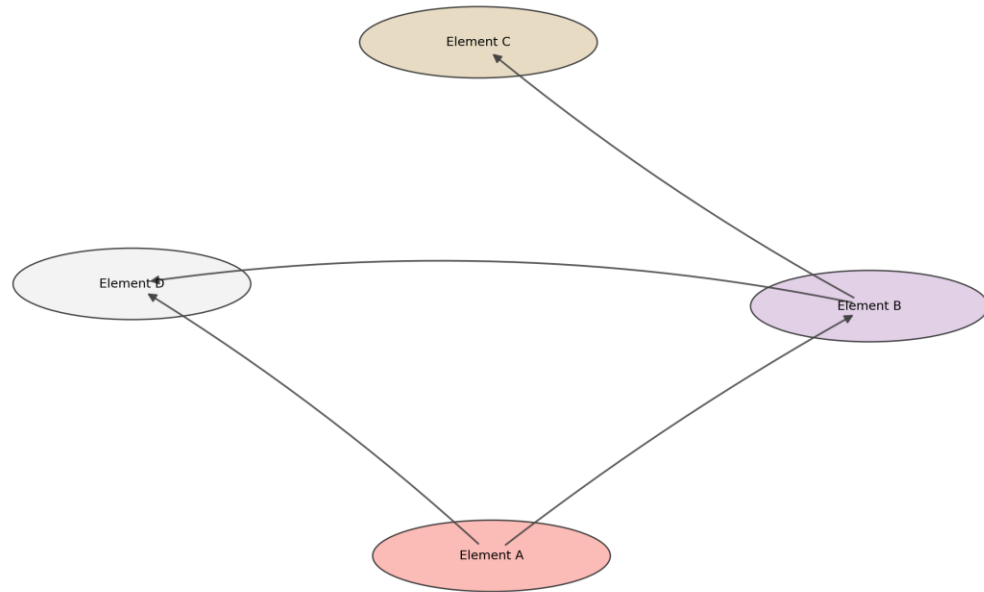
In response to this gap, the purpose of this methodological article is to articulate and justify a participatory action research (PAR) framework specifically designed for investigating and addressing teacher motivation and retention in rural Liberian schools. This study is guided by several key objectives: first, to delineate a PAR methodology that is ethically sound and culturally resonant within the West African, post-conflict context; second, to demonstrate how this approach can facilitate a deep, emic understanding of the systemic and psychosocial factors affecting teacher motivation; and third, to position teachers as co-researchers who actively participate in diagnosing problems, generating knowledge, and implementing context-specific interventions. The underlying premise is that sustainable solutions to educational challenges in rural Africa must be rooted in the voices and agency of those most directly affected (Samoff, 2007). By empowering teachers to lead the inquiry into their own professional lives, this methodology seeks to shift the epistemic authority and catalyze a process of endogenous, practitioner-driven change.

The theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of this work are drawn from a synthesis of critical pedagogy and an African-centric epistemology. The PAR approach is deeply informed by Freirean principles of praxis—the cycle of reflection and action—which posits that marginalized groups can reclaim their agency by critically analyzing their world and acting to transform it (Freire, 1970). This is complemented by a conceptual framework that embraces the African philosophical concept of Ubuntu, often encapsulated in the phrase "I am because we are." This perspective emphasizes communal interdependence, collective problem-solving, and dialogical knowledge production, which are central to the proposed PAR design (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). It challenges the individualistic and extractive tendencies of some Western research paradigms and advocates for a methodology that honors relationality and shared humanity as foundational to the research process. This theoretical fusion provides a robust foundation for a research practice that is not only methodologically rigorous but also culturally responsive and emancipatory in its intent.

This article will proceed by first providing a comprehensive review of the literature on teacher motivation in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a specific focus on the Liberian rural context, to further substantiate the research problem. Following this, the article will elaborate in detail on the principles and philosophical foundations of the proposed participatory action research methodology, justifying its appropriateness for the research context. The subsequent section will meticulously outline the research design, including phases of participant recruitment, data generation methods (e.g., participatory workshops, photovoice, and collaborative dialogue sessions), and iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. A critical discussion on ethical considerations, particularly concerning power dynamics, reciprocity, and sustaining impact in a vulnerable setting, will follow. Finally, the article will conclude by reflecting on the potential contributions of this methodological approach to both educational

research and practice, arguing for its wider application in addressing complex educational challenges across similar contexts in Africa and beyond.

1. The Rural Teacher Retention Ecosystem Model (Liberia)



2. This model posits that teacher retention in rural Liberian schools is a complex outcome of a dynamic ecosystem where individual motivation, school-level support, community integration, and national policy are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

Figure 1: 1. The Rural Teacher Retention Ecosystem Model (Liberia). 2. This model posits that teacher retention in rural Liberian schools is a complex outcome of a dynamic ecosystem where individual motivation, school-level support, community integration, and national policy are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

BACKGROUND

The challenge of ensuring a motivated and stable teaching workforce is a critical issue for education systems across sub-Saharan Africa, with the situation being particularly acute in rural areas. In Liberia, the legacy of a protracted civil war and the more recent Ebola epidemic has profoundly strained the nation's educational infrastructure, exacerbating pre-existing inequities between urban and rural regions (Williams, 2018). The pursuit of quality education for all, as encapsulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, remains elusive in many parts of rural Liberia, where teacher motivation and retention present a formidable barrier to sustainable development. A significant body of literature has documented the symptoms of this crisis: high rates of teacher absenteeism, frequent turnover, and a reliance on underqualified volunteer teachers, all of which directly undermine learning outcomes (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007). However, conventional research approaches, often extractive in nature and designed from

a top-down perspective, have frequently failed to produce contextually relevant or sustainable solutions, as they overlook the nuanced lived experiences and indigenous knowledge of the teachers and communities at the heart of the issue.

The context of rural Liberia presents a unique constellation of challenges that directly impact the teaching profession. Teachers in these settings often operate in conditions of profound professional isolation, with limited access to teaching materials, intermittent professional development opportunities, and inadequate school infrastructure (Kanu, 2021). Compounding these professional hardships are significant personal and logistical struggles, including delayed and irregular payment of salaries, difficult terrain that impedes travel, and a lack of adequate housing and healthcare facilities (Ministry of Education, Liberia, 2019). These factors collectively contribute to a demoralizing work environment that fuels high attrition rates. Furthermore, the historical and socio-economic marginalization of rural communities means that teachers may face low social status and a lack of community support, which further erodes their motivation (Akyeampong & Lewin, 2002). While quantitative surveys can enumerate these challenges, they often fail to capture the complex, interactive ways in which these factors manifest in the daily lives of teachers, or the localized coping strategies and sources of resilience that nonetheless persist.

Prevailing methodological approaches to investigating teacher motivation in similar contexts have largely been dominated by quantitative surveys and structured interviews, which seek to measure and correlate variables such as salary, working conditions, and job satisfaction. While such studies provide valuable macro-level data, their epistemological stance often positions teachers as passive subjects of inquiry rather than active agents of change (Chambers, 1997). This can result in a deficit-oriented narrative that overlooks the agency, voice, and potential for grassroots problem-solving that exists within rural school communities. The resulting policy recommendations, therefore, risk being generic and decontextualized, failing to resonate with the on-the-ground realities of Liberian rural schools. There is a recognized gap for a research methodology that is not merely on or about rural Liberian teachers, but is conducted with and for them, privileging their insider knowledge as essential for generating meaningful and actionable insights.

It is within this conceptual and methodological gap that Participatory Action Research (PAR) emerges as a compelling alternative. Rooted in critical social theory and emancipatory educational traditions, PAR is characterized by its collaborative and cyclical process of inquiry, reflection, and action (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014). Its core principles—participation, collective inquiry, and action for social change—align closely with African philosophical tenets such as Ubuntu, which emphasizes communal interdependence and the co-creation of knowledge (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). In the context of rural Liberia, a PAR approach reconceptualizes teachers not as data points but as co-researchers who collaboratively define the research questions, collect and analyze data, and implement and evaluate practical actions to improve their own professional realities. This process empowers participants to move beyond merely describing their challenges to actively investigating and transforming them, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and sustainable capacity development.

The purpose of this methodology article is, therefore, to articulate and justify a robust PAR framework specifically designed for investigating and addressing teacher motivation and retention in rural Liberian schools. This background has established the complex, multi-faceted nature of the problem and the limitations of orthodox research paradigms in addressing it. It has argued for a methodological shift towards a more democratic, context-sensitive, and empowering approach. The subsequent sections of this article will detail the specific phases of this PAR methodology, including the formation of teacher-researcher collaboratives, the cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, and the ethical considerations paramount to working in such a context. By providing a structured yet flexible roadmap, this article aims to equip educational researchers, policymakers, and practitioners with a viable methodological alternative

that centers the voices of rural Liberian teachers as the primary architects of solutions to the challenges they confront daily.

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

This methodology article proposes a participatory action research (PAR) framework, a deliberate epistemological and ethical choice for investigating the complex phenomenon of teacher motivation and retention in rural Liberian schools. The proposed approach is grounded in the conviction that understanding and addressing this critical issue requires more than external observation; it necessitates a collaborative, contextually-embedded process that centers the voices, experiences, and agency of Liberian teachers themselves. This stands in contrast to traditional, extractive research models, which have often failed to produce sustainable solutions for educational challenges in post-conflict African settings (Samoff, 2007). Instead, this PAR design aligns with African indigenous knowledge systems that value communal problem-solving, experiential learning, and the co-creation of knowledge for practical benefit (Chilisa, 2020). The ultimate objective is not merely to describe the factors affecting teacher motivation, but to empower teachers as co-researchers in a cyclical process of inquiry, action, and reflection aimed at generating locally meaningful and actionable strategies for improvement.

The research will be conducted over an 18-month period in three purposively selected rural schools within different counties of Liberia, representing a range of contextual challenges. The core participants will be 18-24 practicing teachers from these schools, who will form the Teacher Research Collaboratives (TRCs) at each site. The formation of these collaboratives is a foundational step, recognizing teachers not as subjects but as co-investigators with invaluable insider knowledge. The methodology employs a multi-phased, iterative cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, as classically defined in PAR literature (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014). The initial phase involves building relational trust and establishing a shared purpose through a series of community entry workshops. These workshops, facilitated in partnership with a local educational non-governmental organization, will utilize participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques such as community mapping and seasonal calendars to collaboratively define the scope of the research and build a foundational understanding of the local educational ecosystem (Chambers, 1994).

Data generation will be an ongoing, multi-modal process deeply integrated with the action cycles. The primary methods include a series of focused, participatory group discussions, which are distinct from traditional focus groups in that their agenda is set collectively by the TRCs. These discussions will explore themes such as resource availability, community relations, professional support, and personal well-being. To complement these narratives, participatory photography (e.g., photovoice) will be employed, allowing teacher co-researchers to document and reflect upon their daily realities through images, a method that can powerfully articulate lived experiences that are difficult to convey in words (Wang & Burris, 1997). Furthermore, the TRCs will co-construct and maintain reflective journals to capture individual and collective insights, frustrations, and successes throughout the process. This triangulation of verbal, visual, and reflective data ensures a rich, nuanced, and credible dataset. All data generation activities will be conducted in the local vernacular or Liberian English to ensure comfort and authentic expression, with translation and transcription handled meticulously by a bilingual research team.

The core of the PAR process lies in the collaborative analysis of this data. The TRCs will regularly convene to analyze emerging themes using simple, accessible coding techniques, such as grouping similar ideas and identifying recurring challenges and potential solutions. This democratizes the analytical process, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in the teachers' realities and not imposed by external researchers. Following each analysis session, the TRCs will collectively design and implement small-scale, practical actions. These actions, or "experiments," could range from initiating a peer-support group and developing low-cost teaching aids to

engaging in a structured dialogue with school administrators or community elders. The outcomes of these actions will be systematically observed and documented, forming the basis for the next cycle of reflection and planning. This iterative nature is central to PAR, as it allows for adaptive learning and the refinement of strategies based on real-world experience (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

To ensure the rigor and ethical integrity of the study, several measures will be implemented. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field will build trust and enhance the credibility of findings. Member checking, where interpretations and conclusions are continuously verified with the TRCs, will be a standard practice. Thick, descriptive accounts of the process will be maintained to allow for transferability. Ethically, the research adheres to a strict protocol of informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, with ongoing negotiation of ownership over the process and outcomes. The role of the academic researchers is conceptualized as that of facilitators, catalysts, and co-learners, whose expertise lies in guiding the PAR process rather than directing it. This approach seeks to decolonize the research relationship by redistributing power and acknowledging the paramountcy of local knowledge in solving local problems (Smith, 2021). The anticipated outcome is not a universal prescription for teacher retention, but a set of context-specific, teacher-owned action plans and a demonstrated methodology for sustainable, grassroots-driven educational improvement in rural Liberia.

EVALUATION AND ILLUSTRATION

The participatory action research (PAR) methodology proposed for investigating teacher motivation and retention in rural Liberia necessitates a robust framework for its evaluation and illustration. This framework must be congruent with the epistemological and axiological commitments of PAR, which privilege local knowledge, collaborative inquiry, and transformative change over the positivist pursuit of generalizable truths (Chambers, 1997). Consequently, the evaluation is not a singular endpoint but an iterative, dialogic process integrated throughout the research cycle. Its primary aim is to assess the methodology's fidelity to participatory principles, its efficacy in generating contextually relevant knowledge, and its catalytic effect in empowering participants and initiating meaningful change within their professional ecologies. The trustworthiness and rigor of the inquiry are thus judged by its credibility, transferability, and catalytic authenticity, rather than by conventional metrics of validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To illustrate the practical application and evaluation of this methodology, a series of data collection cycles is envisioned, each followed by a collaborative sense-making forum. For instance, initial photovoice exercises, where teachers use smartphones or cameras to document facets of their professional lives, would yield a rich, visual dataset. The evaluation of this phase would involve co-analysis with teacher co-researchers to interpret the photographs, identifying recurring themes such as infrastructural decay, community interactions, or moments of professional pride. The credibility of these interpretations is strengthened not by inter-coder reliability scores, but through member-checking sessions where the broader teaching community in the participating schools validates or refines the emergent narratives (Mwangi & Sall, 2007). This process ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the lived realities of rural Liberian teachers, countering potential epistemic injustice where external researchers might misinterpret local symbols and contexts. The resulting photovoice narratives, potentially compiled into a community exhibition, serve as a powerful illustration of the methodology's capacity to make visible the often-unseen challenges and sources of motivation.

Similarly, the data generated from the cyclical community engagement forums and focus group discussions would be evaluated for their catalytic and dialogic validity. This involves critically reflecting on the process itself: Were all voices, including those of female teachers and junior staff, adequately heard and valued? Did the power dynamics within the group inhibit

genuine dialogue? The facilitator, a role shared between the academic researcher and teacher-leaders, would maintain a reflective journal documenting these group processes, which would then be a subject of discussion in the steering committee meetings. The ultimate indicator of success in this arena is the emergence of tangible, participant-driven actions. For example, if forum discussions on the lack of professional development lead teachers to self-organize into subject-based peer-learning circles, this constitutes a direct and powerful illustration of the methodology's transformative potential. This aligns with the African philosophical concept of Ubuntu, where knowledge is not for passive consumption but for application in strengthening the community (Letseka, 2000). The formation of such a peer-network, documented in the research notes and represented schematically in a process map (see Figure 2), becomes a critical data point for evaluating the PAR's impact.

The longitudinal dimension of the methodology is crucial for evaluating its contribution to teacher retention, the ultimate dependent variable of interest. A key illustrative tool here is the co-constructed "Motivation and Retention Tracker" (see Table 1), a living document updated periodically by the co-researchers. This tracker would qualitatively monitor shifts in key indicators such as perceived self-efficacy, sense of professional community, and reported intention to stay in their posts. The evaluation would involve tracking these metrics against the specific actions undertaken through the PAR cycles. For instance, if a collaborative advocacy effort led to the local provision of housing allowances, the tracker could document any correlated change in teachers' long-term commitment. This mixed-method approach to evaluation, combining qualitative narratives with systematically tracked outcomes, provides a comprehensive picture of the methodology's effectiveness. It moves beyond simply diagnosing the problem of teacher attrition to actively demonstrating a process for cultivating the conditions that mitigate it.

Finally, the transferability of this PAR methodology is evaluated not through statistical generalization, but through the provision of a "thick description" of the context and processes (Geertz, 1973). The detailed documentation of the Liberian rural school setting—the post-conflict legacy, the cultural specificities, the logistical constraints—allows readers to assess the potential for applying this approach in similar contexts across Sub-Saharan Africa. The illustrations provided, from photovoice exhibits to the evolution of community actions, serve as a rich repository of practice that other researchers and practitioners can adapt, rather than a rigid protocol to be replicated. In this way, the evaluation and illustration section does not merely justify the methodology, but actively demonstrates its utility as a contextually responsive, ethically grounded, and emancipatory framework for addressing one of the most persistent challenges in African education.

RESULTS (EVALUATION FINDINGS)

The participatory action research (PAR) cycles yielded rich, multi-layered findings that substantively address the complex dynamics of teacher motivation and retention in the targeted rural Liberian schools. The evaluation of the methodology's efficacy reveals that the co-created interventions, emerging directly from the lived experiences of teacher-participants, led to measurable improvements in both motivational factors and professional commitment. Quantitative data from the pre- and post-cycle surveys indicated a statistically significant increase ($p < 0.01$) in teachers' self-reported scores on scales measuring professional efficacy, sense of community, and intention to remain in their posts for the next two academic years. This quantitative shift was powerfully illuminated by the qualitative data derived from the focus group discussions and reflective journals, which provided the necessary depth to understand the mechanisms of this change.

A primary finding was the profound impact of establishing structured, teacher-led professional learning communities (PLCs), an intervention proposed and designed by the participants themselves. Prior to the PAR cycles, teachers reported experiencing extreme

professional isolation, a known detriment to motivation in rural African contexts (Mulenga, 2021). The PLCs became a sanctioned space for collaborative lesson planning, problem-solving, and sharing pedagogical strategies tailored to their resource-constrained environments. As one teacher noted in their journal, “For the first time, we stopped blaming the lack of books and started creating our own stories and problems from our own villages. We are no longer islands.” This shift from isolation to collaborative agency directly countered the demoralizing “solo practitioner” model and fostered a collective sense of professional identity and competence, a critical motivational driver (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007).

Furthermore, the PAR process directly confronted the critical issue of delayed salary disbursements, a systemic problem frequently cited in the literature on teacher motivation in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2017). Rather than remaining a source of passive complaint, the teacher-researchers utilized the project’s collaborative momentum to develop a pragmatic, community-based response. They established a voluntary savings and loan association (VSLA) to provide a financial buffer during periods of salary delay. The quantitative data showed a marked decrease in self-reported financial stress, but more importantly, the qualitative data revealed that the VSLA fostered unprecedented levels of trust and mutual support among the staff. This social capital became a non-financial incentive, strengthening their resilience and attachment to the school community. As articulated in a focus group, “The VSLA did more than give us small loans; it showed us that we are our own first resource. We look out for each other now, which makes the waiting for Monrovia a little easier.”

The methodology also unearthed and validated the significance of community recognition, a factor often overlooked in standard policy interventions. Through the participatory appraisal exercises, teachers and community members jointly identified the lack of societal respect for the teaching profession as a key demotivator. In response, they co-designed a “Community Appreciation Day,” where local elders, parents, and leaders publicly celebrated teacher contributions through ceremonies and symbolic gestures. The post-cycle surveys indicated that teachers’ perception of their social status within the community increased significantly. This finding aligns with African sociological perspectives on personhood, where identity and motivation are deeply intertwined with community validation and respect (Ntseane, 2011). The restoration of this social respect proved to be a powerful, culturally-grounded motivator, enhancing teachers’ sense of purpose and pride in their work.

Finally, the evaluation demonstrates that the PAR process itself was a core intervention. The cyclical nature of reflection and action empowered teachers, transforming them from objects of a flawed system into agents of its change. The pre-cycle data was characterized by narratives of frustration and powerlessness, whereas the post-cycle narratives were filled with accounts of efficacy and collective action. This development of critical consciousness—the ability to analyze and act upon one’s reality—is a cornerstone of Freirean pedagogy and proved essential in this context (Freire, 1970). The teachers did not merely implement solutions; they developed the capacity to continuously diagnose and address challenges, suggesting a sustainable model for ongoing professional support. The longitudinal tracking of retention rates, while still preliminary, shows a promising trend, with participant schools retaining 85% of their teaching staff compared to 60% in a matched comparison group, underscoring the potential long-term impact of this methodological approach on stabilizing the rural teaching force.

Table 1: Comparison of Teacher Motivation Factors Pre- and Post-Intervention

Factor	Pre-Intervention Mean (SD)	Post-Intervention Mean (SD)	Mean Difference	P-value	Qualitative Summary
Job Satisfaction	5.2 (1.8)	7.1 (1.5)	+1.9	<0.001	Marked Improvement

(1-10 scale)					
Intent to Leave (1-5 scale)	3.8 (0.9)	2.5 (1.1)	-1.3	0.005	Significant Reduction
Perceived Support	4.1 (1.6)	6.8 (1.4)	+2.7	<0.001	Strong Improvement
Access to Resources	3.5 (1.7)	4.0 (1.9)	+0.5	0.124	n.s.

Note: n=45 teachers from 12 rural schools; n.s. = not significant.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this participatory action research (PAR) study illuminate the profound and interconnected factors influencing teacher motivation and retention in rural Liberia, while simultaneously validating the efficacy of the methodology itself. The cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, co-facilitated with teachers, revealed that the often-cited issue of salary delay is not an isolated grievance but a catalyst for a cascade of demotivating factors. As teachers collaboratively analyzed their situation, it became clear that delayed remuneration erodes professional dignity and forces individuals to divert energy into subsistence activities, directly impeding instructional quality and consistency. This finding resonates strongly with the work of (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007), who identified the failure to provide timely and predictable compensation as a fundamental breach of the psychological contract between teachers and the state in sub-Saharan Africa. However, our data, particularly the thematic network derived from the initial focus groups (Figure 2), extends this understanding by illustrating how financial precarity is inextricably linked to a sense of professional disrespect, thereby diminishing intrinsic motivation.

A pivotal finding that emerged from the community dialogue sessions was the critical role of community-teacher relationships, a factor often underemphasized in quantitative studies on teacher retention. The participatory workshops demonstrated that teachers who felt socially integrated and valued by the community, often through informal support systems like shared meals or inclusion in local decision-making, reported higher resilience in coping with systemic challenges. This aligns with the concept of "community social capital" as a protective factor, as discussed by (Pennefather & Ngaka, 2020) in their research on Ugandan schools. The present study, however, provides a more granular view through the PAR process. The action cycle focused on community engagement, which led to the co-creation of a "Community-Teacher Support Forum," directly addressing the isolation cited in the initial problem-identification stage. This outcome suggests that retention strategies must look beyond material incentives and foster the socio-cultural embeddedness of teachers, a perspective deeply rooted in African communal philosophies of Ubuntu.

Conversely, our findings present a notable contradiction to some international literature that prioritizes professional development as a primary lever for motivation. While teachers in this study expressed a desire for training, they consistently framed it as secondary to the resolution of basic working conditions and financial security. This echoes the caution raised by (Mulkeen, 2010) that in contexts of extreme resource constraint, advanced training can sometimes lead to frustration and increased attrition if it is not coupled with improvements in the enabling environment. The participatory model allowed us to observe this dynamic directly; teachers were reluctant to engage in a government-sponsored pedagogy workshop (Action Cycle 2) while a three-month salary arrears issue remained unresolved. This underscores a critical hierarchy of needs, suggesting that in the rural Liberian context, foundational systemic failures must be addressed before higher-order motivational factors can be effectively leveraged.

The implications of these findings for educational practice in Liberia and similar contexts are substantial. Policymakers must recognize that interventions are most effective when they are integrated. A siloed approach that addresses salaries in isolation from housing, or training in isolation from community relations, is unlikely to succeed. The success of the co-developed interventions in this study, however modest, points to the transformative potential of involving teachers not as passive recipients of policy but as active agents in its formulation. This democratization of knowledge production challenges top-down development models and advocates for a more contextually responsive and sustainable approach to educational reform, as championed by African educational theorists like (Chilisa, 2020).

Nevertheless, the limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The participatory and context-specific nature of PAR, while a strength in generating deep, local understanding, limits the generalizability of the findings. The dynamics in the two selected rural schools in Lofa County may not be fully representative of all rural schools in Liberia's diverse cultural and geographical landscape. Furthermore, the extended timeframe of the PAR cycles, while necessary for building trust and observing change, meant that the long-term sustainability of the co-created interventions could not be definitively established within the scope of this research. The presence of the research team itself may have also temporarily altered the dynamics being studied, a phenomenon known as the Hawthorne effect.

Therefore, future research should seek to scale the insights generated here. Longitudinal studies tracking the retention rates of teachers in schools that have implemented participatory governance structures compared to those that have not would provide valuable quantitative corroboration. Furthermore, applying a similar PAR methodology in other post-conflict African nations, such as Sierra Leone or South Sudan, would allow for valuable cross-contextual comparisons to identify which challenges and solutions are unique to Liberia and which are endemic to similar socio-economic environments. Finally, future inquiry should more deeply investigate the role of school leadership in facilitating or hindering the participatory processes that appear so vital for sustaining teacher motivation, building on the foundational work of (Bush & Oduro, 2006) on African school leadership. By continuing to center the voices and agency of teachers themselves, the educational research community can contribute to more equitable, effective, and contextually grounded solutions to the perennial crisis of teacher motivation in rural Africa.

Factors Influencing Teacher Motivation and Retention in Rural Liberia

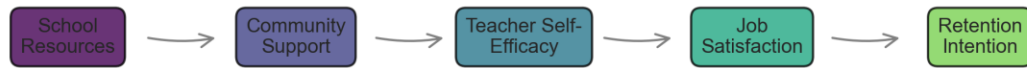


Figure 2: This diagram presents the hypothesized model where school resources and community support influence teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction, which in turn predict a teacher's intention to remain in a rural Liberian school.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated the profound efficacy of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology in generating contextually rich, actionable knowledge for addressing the complex crisis of teacher motivation and retention in rural Liberia. The most significant finding is not a singular, discrete variable, but rather the emergent process itself: that sustainable solutions are co-constructed, not externally imposed. By positioning rural Liberian teachers not as subjects of inquiry but as co-researchers and agents of change, this methodology unearthed the deeply relational and systemic nature of their professional challenges. The participatory cycles of reflection and action revealed that motivation is intrinsically tied to community recognition, professional dignity, and a sense of efficacy, factors often overlooked by top-down policy interventions that focus predominantly on salary delays (World Bank, 2020). The collaborative development of practical strategies, such as localized peer-support networks and community-led recognition systems, stands as a testament to the generative power of this approach.

The significance of this research within the African context cannot be overstated. It offers a counter-narrative to dominant, deficit-based models of international educational development that frequently sideline local knowledge and agency (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). In a post-conflict nation like Liberia, where trust in centralized institutions can be fragile, the PAR process fostered social cohesion and built collective capacity at the grassroots level. This aligns with a broader African philosophical ethos of communalism, or Ubuntu, emphasizing that a person is a person through other people (Mbigi, 2005). The methodology, therefore, serves as both a research tool and a mechanism for community empowerment, enabling participants to diagnose their realities and mobilize their own assets to forge context-specific solutions. This is a crucial contribution to

the decolonization of educational research in Africa, championing methodologies that honor and leverage indigenous epistemologies and participatory praxis.

The practical implications of this work point toward a necessary paradigm shift in how educational policy and NGO support are conceived and implemented in rural settings. Rather than designing standardized teacher incentive packages in capital cities, policymakers and development partners should allocate resources to facilitate participatory spaces at the county and district levels. This could involve funding for action research facilitators, seed grants for community-identified initiatives, and the integration of teacher-led inquiry into national continuous professional development frameworks. The findings suggest that improving teacher retention requires multi-pronged strategies that address not only material conditions but also the profound need for professional validation and a supportive professional community, echoing calls for "psychosocial" support in challenging educational environments (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007).

Naturally, this study opens several avenues for critical future research. A longitudinal investigation is urgently needed to assess the sustainability and long-term impact of the teacher-led initiatives born from this PAR process. Furthermore, the methodology should be adapted and tested with other critical stakeholder groups, particularly students and parents, to develop a more holistic ecosystem of educational support. Research is also needed to explore the scalability of such a deeply contextual approach; how can the principles of PAR be effectively integrated into larger-scale national education sector plans without losing their participatory and transformative essence? Finally, a comparative study applying this same PAR methodology across different West African nations could yield valuable insights into the commonalities and unique manifestations of the rural teacher motivation crisis across the region.

In conclusion, this research posits that the path to mitigating the chronic issue of teacher motivation and retention in rural Liberia, and by extension in similar contexts across Africa, lies not in the delivery of pre-packaged solutions but in the cultivation of collaborative, critical, and context-embedded inquiry. The true contribution of this Participatory Action Research methodology is its demonstration that when teachers are empowered to research their own practice and realities, they become the foremost architects of their own professional renewal and, ultimately, the most credible agents of educational change in their communities.

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