

Review

Policies and Practices of Teachers' Professional Development from a Lifelong Learning Perspective

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Abstract: Teachers are key practitioners in unlocking the potential of each learner and achieving inclusive and equitable quality education. According to the 2023 Global Teacher Report, there remains a global shortage of teachers, which threatens the future of education. In order to ensure both the quantity and quality of the teaching workforce, it is necessary to reexamine teachers' professional development from the perspective of lifelong learning, strengthening their dual role as lifelong learners and leaders of lifelong learning. This will help establish a new social contract for the teaching profession. Based on the dual evolution of global development trends and historical policy work, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) and Shanghai Normal University jointly organized the "Teachers as Lifelong Learners: Policy and Practice International Research Seminar". The seminar aimed to explain the rich connotations and key features of lifelong learning, share policies and practices on continuous professional development for teachers in various countries, and provide theoretical guidance and practical experience for teachers' professional development. Although approaches such as policy support, institutional backing, technological empowerment, and research-led initiatives have become international consensus and action for supporting teachers' professional development, facing both macro-level societal challenges and micro-level educational field challenges, continuous deepening of international exchange and cooperation is still needed to promote teachers' lifelong learning and continuous professional development.

Keywords: lifelong learning; teacher professional development; UIL; teachers

1. Introduction

The concept of lifelong education in the 21st century has become increasingly enriched. Influenced by holistic educational ideas, lifelong education is more closely linked with social and cultural development. It advocates for the promotion of individual self-improvement, the enhancement of urban social competitiveness, and the sustainable development of human civilization through lifelong education. At its core, it represents the complex unity of social governance and self-directed learning [1]. Since the publication of the UNESCO Delors Report in 1972, "lifelong learning" has remained a central concept in educational policies and practices. It has been reiterated and reinforced in several key reports, including the Delors Report, Education for Reflection: A Shift Towards the Concept of "Global Common Good", and Reimagining Our Future Together: Building a New Social Contract for Education. These reports emphasize lifelong learning as a critical strategy for reshaping educational systems, establishing a new social contract for education, and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Ensuring the availability of qualified teachers is a fundamental condition for realizing Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" [2]. Consequently, the role of teachers has garnered widespread and sustained attention. In 2021, Reimagining Our Future Together: Building a New Social

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Contract for Education redefined teaching as a collaborative profession, viewed teachers' development as a lifelong journey, and called for improvements in teachers' working conditions, enhancing the status of teachers, and increasing teachers' involvement in decision-making [3]. The 2022 Education Transformation Summit emphasized teachers as drivers of change [4]. In 2023, the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Group on the Teaching Profession reaffirmed this view and made several recommendations, including the formulation and implementation of national teacher policies, improving teacher investment policies, and strengthening teacher training [5]. In addition, the 2023 Global Teacher Report indicates that by 2030, 44 million primary and secondary school teachers will be needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in the education sector. To address this issue, the report emphasizes the need to establish a new social contract for the teaching profession, create opportunities for collaboration, include teachers in social dialogue, and promote innovation among educators. This includes transforming teacher education and professional development from the perspective of lifelong learning, enabling teachers to lead their own career development based on their teaching knowledge and judgment [6]. For teachers, lifelong learning in the process of professional development is essential. This is determined by the unique characteristics of the teaching profession and aligns with the societal demands for cultivating qualified teachers. At the same time, teachers hold dual identities as lifelong learners and leaders of lifelong learning. The former refers to the personal growth and self-development needs of teachers, while the latter emphasizes their role in guiding and setting an example for students. In the process of teacher professional development, the instrumental value of lifelong learning is indisputable, but the recognition of teachers' dual identities still requires reinforcement. Therefore, re-examining teacher professional development from the perspective of lifelong learning is of significant importance in strengthening teachers' dual identities and balancing the instrumental and humanistic aspects of professional development.

2. Theoretical Perspective: Explanation of the Concept and Characteristics of Lifelong Learning

In the rapidly changing landscape of contemporary society, lifelong learning has long been recognized as a crucial means for promoting individual development and social transformation. As the primary implementers of educational policies and practices, teachers bear the main responsibility for putting these policies into action. Therefore, their professional development should be integrated into the discourse of lifelong learning, allowing them to play a pivotal role in driving educational change. Based on this, this study provides an in-depth interpretation and explanation of the concept and characteristics of lifelong learning from three aspects: tracing historical traditions, focusing on contemporary development, and empowering teachers. It aims to offer theoretical guidance for teachers' professional development.

2.1. Tracing Tradition: The Long History of the Lifelong Learning Concept

Although lifelong learning has only been widely accepted as a policy discourse in the past half-century, its concept has deep historical roots in both Eastern and Western cultures. In *The Analects of Confucius*, under the section "Wei Zheng" (On Governance), Confucius says: "At fifteen, I set my heart on learning; at thirty, I stood firm; at forty, I was no longer confused; at fifty, I knew the will of heaven; at sixty, my ear was attuned; at seventy, I followed my heart's desires without overstepping the bounds." This passage reflects Confucius' own process of learning and self-cultivation, encapsulating the ancient Chinese concept of lifelong learning. Similarly, Plato's *The Republic* outlines an education system in stages, which also embodies the idea of lifelong learning: children begin schooling at age 6, learning reading, writing, arithmetic, music, and physical education. At 18, they receive military and physical training, at 21 they begin higher education, at 30 they start studying philosophy while serving in the military or government, and by the age of

50, they should be prepared to assume leadership roles in the state. In Islam, the Quran advises, "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave", emphasizing a lifelong commitment to learning. Additionally, the educational philosophy of Comenius also contains profound ideas about lifelong learning. After Paul Lengrand's 1970 publication, *Introduction to Lifelong Education*, which systematically addressed the concept, lifelong learning gradually became integrated into educational theory and policy, largely thanks to the advocacy of UNESCO, and ultimately became a global consensus. This historical context demonstrates how the idea of lifelong learning has been a fundamental part of various cultural traditions and has evolved over time into the modern understanding of lifelong education.

2.2. Focusing on Development: A New Interpretation of the Concept of Lifelong Learning in the Contemporary Era

Although the concept of lifelong learning has a long history, its meaning has not been fixed but has continuously evolved in response to changing historical contexts, societal values, and emerging global challenges. With the ongoing transformations in global politics, economics, and technology, the field of education has also undergone significant changes. Education is no longer viewed solely as a tool to promote economic growth under human capital theory. It now also emphasizes ecological sustainability, human well-being, and incorporates more humanistic values. Education is no longer confined to schools or limited to passive learning of cognitive knowledge and skills; it has broken free from the boundaries of formal education, enriched its content, and placed more emphasis on the learner's active role. Lifelong learning now extends across the entire lifecycle and all aspects of life, encouraging learners to engage in self-directed and proactive learning.

In addition, the practice of lifelong learning has led to the development of fundamental models, such as the "Global South model", which exhibits the following distinctive features:

Epistemological Pluralism: This model emphasizes that everyone possesses the capacity to learn, highlighting the wide-ranging nature of lifelong learning. It asserts that learning is not limited by age, background, or socioeconomic status, and that every individual has the potential to engage in the learning process.

Contextual Knowledge: The model stresses the importance of local communities as a source of diverse forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. It acknowledges that learners should be provided with contexts that help them construct knowledge based on their own experiences and realities. This highlights the contextuality of knowledge and the active role of learners in the learning process.

Critical Consciousness: Learners are encouraged to have a clear awareness of their social, cultural, and political backgrounds. The model advocates for the pursuit of social justice both at the national and international levels. This critical awareness emphasizes the humanistic aspect of lifelong learning, fostering an understanding of the ways in which education can be used to challenge inequalities and promote social change.

2.3. Focusing on Teachers: The Transformative Direction Led by Lifelong Learning

The ongoing societal transformations and the deepening of the concept of lifelong learning place higher and more complex demands on the role of teachers. In the present era, there are growing expectations for educators, who are increasingly expected to meet a wide range of needs and fulfill various roles. A single teacher today is expected to possess up to 174 distinct competencies to effectively address the diverse and evolving challenges in education. The phrase "society's refusal to use school graduates", mentioned in the Full Report (or Furl Report) [7] this phenomenon reveals the limitations of formal school education. After entering the workforce, individuals need to engage in lifelong learning to achieve professional development and meet the challenges of an ever-changing

ing era. This need is even more urgent for teachers, who hold the dual roles of both lifelong learners and lifelong learning leaders. Therefore, the professional development of teachers must continuously evolve to align with the demands of lifelong learning.

The major viewpoints and trends derived from forty years of research in the International Journal of Lifelong Education have provided the following new directions for teacher professional development: Recognition of Teachers' Life World and Context: When the personal context and life experiences of teachers are acknowledged, and the needs of adults are prioritized over curricular order, motivation for learning emerges. This emphasizes the importance of considering teachers' individual experiences and contexts in their professional development. Learning Includes Self-Reflection and Biographical Learning: Teachers' professional growth should include self-reflection, biographical learning, and the determination of their personal learning trajectory to create and reshape their professional identity. This approach encourages teachers to reflect on their experiences and continually evolve in their practice. Collaborative and Experiential Learning: Learning should involve authenticity, reflection, and collaboration among colleagues. Rather than viewing learning as an individual, utilitarian process, it should be seen as a shared experience within a community of practice. This highlights the importance of collaboration and peer support in teachers' professional growth. Transition to Lifelong Learning: The shift to lifelong learning involves four key components: learning to know (cognitive learning), learning to do (skills development), learning to live together (social learning and collaboration), and learning to be (personal and professional development). These elements suggest that teachers must develop not only knowledge and skills but also social and emotional competencies, which are vital for thriving in a dynamic educational environment. To become "outstanding" professionals, teachers must not only have knowledge and technical expertise but also possess a strong sense of moral awareness, a passion for learning, a spirit of dedication, a positive professional identity, self-efficacy, organizational belonging, proactivity, adaptability in daily situations, and autonomy. These qualities are essential for teachers to excel in dynamic and challenging educational environments.

In summary, the concept of lifelong learning has remained relevant and has deepened over time, gaining widespread recognition from the international community. It has become a core driver of societal development and educational reform. For teachers, lifelong learning is not only a professional requirement to continuously update their knowledge, master cutting-edge educational concepts and technologies, and ensure the timeliness and innovation of their teaching content, but it also embodies their dual identity as lifelong learners and leaders of lifelong learning. In the process of teacher professional development, teachers are not passive recipients of activities such as training and evaluations; rather, they are active learners. Beyond the "homogenization" demands of the teaching profession, there are individual "heterogeneous" needs, meaning that the process of professional development is a process in which teachers' professional refinement and self-growth align at the individual level. More importantly, teachers can also become leaders of lifelong learning in their educational practices. By demonstrating their own learning journeys, they can show students the joy and value of learning, encourage them to adopt a lifelong learning mindset, and foster the self-directed learning abilities, critical thinking, and innovation necessary to face future challenges. This way, students grow into lifelong learners capable of adapting to the evolving demands of society.

3. International Experience in Teacher Professional Development

Teachers, as lifelong learners and leaders of lifelong learning, play a crucial role not only in global policies and reports but also in the practical implementation of teacher professional development in various countries. While different nations have developed unique, locally adapted approaches to supporting teacher professional growth, the deepening understanding of lifelong learning has increasingly highlighted the dual identity of

teachers. This dual role has become a key direction guiding reforms in teacher professional development. In response, countries have adopted strategies such as strengthening top-level design, enhancing social participation, leveraging technology, and redefining the teacher's role. These measures ensure teachers' right to lifelong learning, provide diverse learning resources and flexible learning opportunities, and respect individual learning needs. By doing so, they further reinforce teachers' status as both lifelong learners and facilitators of lifelong learning, imbuing teacher professional development with a stronger humanistic dimension.

3.1. Strengthening Top-Level Design and Formulating National Policies

Chile guarantees teachers' right to lifelong learning and supports their continuous professional development through legal provisions. For example, the law recognizes that new teachers, during their induction process, have the right to receive support from experienced mentors who have demonstrated strong performance in teaching evaluations. Additionally, the law divides teachers' careers into different stages and provides free training throughout their professional journey based on their performance levels. Furthermore, Chile has established a legally defined teacher professional development system, which consists of two subsystems: the Training Support System and the Teacher Professional Development Recognition and Promotion System. The goal of this system is to acknowledge and facilitate the advancement of education professionals, enabling them to reach the expected levels of professional growth while offering attractive career pathways that encourage continuous excellence in classroom teaching.

Several African countries have made systematic efforts through national and educational policies to improve teacher professional development:

Nigeria: The National Education Policy emphasizes a comprehensive teacher training and support system, ensuring that educators receive continuous professional development and access to necessary resources.

Senegal: The National Education Development Plan (PNDP) focuses on decentralizing education planning and management, making professional development programs more targeted and ensuring that teacher training aligns with local needs and contexts.

Morocco: The National Strategy for the Promotion of Teacher Training (SNPFE) prioritizes continuous professional development and skills enhancement. This is achieved through regular training workshops, peer collaboration, and the provision of modern teaching resources.

To meet the new demands of teacher education in the 2020s, Finland has designed a comprehensive Teacher Education Development Programme 2022-2026, which covers core teacher education, induction training, and continuous professional learning throughout a teacher's career. This program sets three key goals for teachers' core education, induction, and lifelong learning: Broad-based core competencies – ensuring teachers possess a strong foundational skill set. Professional expertise and innovation – enabling teachers to create new pedagogical solutions and approaches. Self-development and institutional growth – fostering teachers' ability to enhance their own skills while contributing to the development of educational institutions.

3.2. Enhancing Social Participation and Activating Educational Resources

Finland promotes continuous professional development for teachers through broad social collaboration, with the state, various education and training providers, employers, and teachers collectively sharing the responsibility for teacher development. For example, the government funds in-service training related to educational policies and reforms, while employers are legally obligated to ensure teachers participate in such training.

Additionally, Finland's higher education institutions collaborate to maintain a sufficiently unified education level, ensuring a common teaching qualification. Providers of early childhood education and care, general education, vocational training, and lifelong

learning adopt a research-based approach to jointly conduct teacher induction training and continuous learning [8]. This approach helps address the lack of national standardization in teacher education — a challenge posed by university autonomy — thus ensuring the quality and consistency of teacher training programs.

To support teachers in promoting lifelong learning at the local level, Japan has established Community Schools and Lifelong Learning Centers (Kominkan). Community Schools are schools with school management councils, a system introduced in 2005. Since then, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has been implementing the Community School Promotion Plan, which consists of two major projects: The Community School Promotion Project – aimed at expanding the community school model across Japan. The Community School Forum Promotion Project – facilitating discussions and knowledge sharing to enhance the implementation of school management councils. MEXT is working to coordinate community schools with local school collaboration activities to build cooperative frameworks between schools and local communities, thereby enhancing teachers' leadership in promoting lifelong learning at the local level. After World War II, Japan's local governments established Lifelong Learning Centers (Kominkan) under the Social Education Act. These centers, operated by local government agencies, rely heavily on teachers serving as social education coordinators. They provide not only facilities such as classrooms, conference rooms, reading rooms, kitchens, tatami-style Japanese rooms, tea rooms, daycare facilities, audiovisual rooms, and sports facilities, but also offer courses in life skills, hobbies, and cultural activities to meet the daily needs of residents in towns and specific local areas.

Ghana's "Transforming Teacher Education and Learning" (T-TEL) program has enhanced the capabilities of new teachers through collaboration between universities and schools. Additionally, UNESCO, in partnership with Huawei, has leveraged technology to support Egypt's "Open Schools for All" initiative. This has been achieved through the development of online courses, the establishment of virtual practice communities, the creation of e-libraries, and the setup of content studios. These broad social participation efforts have provided richer and higher-quality resources for teacher professional development.

3.3. Leveraging Technology to Empower and Enrich Learning Opportunities

South Africa has developed a comprehensive Teacher Education and Development Strategic Framework, aimed at identifying and meeting both individual and system-wide training needs through collaboration, coordination, financial support, and time investment. The framework also seeks to attract more high-achieving students to pursue teaching careers, strengthen teacher support at the local level, and establish an expanded and accessible formal teacher education system. South Africa has both a top-down teacher support structure, consisting of a national institute, nine provincial institutes, and regional teacher development centers, as well as specialized agencies that support teacher professional development, such as the South African Council for Educators (SACE). These entities work collaboratively at various levels to provide systematic support for teacher development while also ensuring specialization. SACE is primarily responsible for maintaining the registration of all practicing teachers nationwide, managing the code of professional ethics, overseeing disciplinary measures for violations of the code, and setting professional standards for the teaching profession. SACE also manages the Continuing Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) Management Information System. On the supply side, it maintains and manages a database of educational institutions, evaluates and accredits the courses offered by registered institutions, and allocates professional development points to accredited courses. On the demand side, SACE manages a database of teacher points, allowing teachers to participate in accredited programs and submit training certificates to earn points based on their individual needs. SACE connects educational institutions and teachers, facilitating access to high-quality course resources, certifications,

and the accumulation of learning outcomes. It also sets clear guidelines for teachers, requiring them to earn at least 150 points over a three-year period and to complete 80 hours of training annually, providing standardized and regulated guidance for teachers' ongoing professional development.

To promote more and better learning opportunities for all adults, the European Commission, with funding from the Erasmus + program (EU's education, training, youth, and sports program), established the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EP-ALE). This multilingual platform is designed for adult learning professionals, offering content, resources, training, and networking opportunities to support communities in learning new skills, accessing information, and engaging in adult learning activities. Currently, EPAL has over 148,000 members across 37 countries and supports 32 languages. The platform is centered around sharing content and opportunities related to adult learning, with an emphasis on community and collaboration. It supports the continuous professional development of adult educators by providing key thematic content and opportunities for cooperation and peer learning. Specifically, the platform features a dedicated "Learn" module that offers a wide range of learning resources, including:

- 1) Resource Centre.
- 2) Course Catalogue.
- 3) Resource Kits.
- 4) Newscasts.
- 5) Podcasts.

EPAL also organizes online activities such as EPAL community meetings and online discussions. It provides collaborative spaces and practice communities where adult education professionals can interact, share, and exchange ideas with other adult learning experts from across Europe. The platform encourages the collection of community stories, experiences, and solutions to enhance e-learning opportunities, online teaching, and reflections on the provision of adult learning.

Africa places great emphasis on leveraging technology and innovative approaches to enhance teaching practices and professional development.

Nigeria: The Smart Schools and Digital Resource Centre initiatives aim to integrate advanced technology into the education system, providing educators with extensive digital teaching materials and training programs. These initiatives help teachers improve their skills and adapt to new educational technologies.

Gabon: The Institut National des Sciences de l'Éducation de Libreville (INSEP) has launched a distance learning program that offers teachers continuous professional development opportunities through online and remote learning platforms. This initiative enables teachers to enhance their teaching skills and knowledge without being restricted by traditional in-person training courses.

Rwanda: The competency-based teacher training program focuses on equipping teachers with practical skills and innovative teaching methods that can be directly applied in the classroom. It aims to develop teachers' critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and adaptability.

3.4. Redefining the Teacher's Role and Strengthening Their Agency

Teachers' leadership can help unlock and mobilize their desire to develop new skills and knowledge, fostering continuous professional development and achieving lifelong learning. The 2023 Global Teacher Prize winner, Sister Zeph from Pakistan, highlighted the value of teacher leadership based on her own experience. She emphasized that teacher leadership goes beyond traditional classroom boundaries — it involves guiding students to reach their full potential, empowering colleagues to innovate, and engaging communities in the educational journey.

The HertsCam Network in the UK originated in the 1990s as a collaboration between the University of Cambridge and the Hertfordshire education authorities. It has since

evolved into an independent, teacher-led, nonprofit organization dedicated to educational transformation through teacher leadership. HertsCam's core programs include: Teacher-Led Development Work (TLDW): A school-based initiative that enables teachers to initiate, design, and lead development projects, fostering change through teacher-driven action. TLDW operates through school-based workshops that encourage collaborative learning and professional growth. Master's in Education (MEd) in Leading Teaching and Learning: A two-year, part-time program taught by experienced educators. The program is structured around a 12-theme framework, covering topics such as educational leadership, professionalism, organizational science, pedagogy, and project design and management. Programs like HertsCam demonstrate that high-agency teachers tend to exhibit a stronger sense of moral purpose and higher levels of self-efficacy. These factors significantly contribute to teacher resilience, professional commitment, and motivation for career development and retention [9].

Building on the HertsCam Network and the International Teacher Leadership Initiative, Kazakhstan has implemented the Teacher Leadership in Kazakhstan (TLK) program based on the Teacher-Led Development Work (TLDW) approach. This three-year program involves 16 principals, 32 mentors, and 150 teachers from mainstream schools in four different regions of Kazakhstan. TLK aims to: Implement Non-Positional Teacher Leadership (NPTL) practices in mainstream schools. Develop the capacity to sustain and support NPTL. Foster school leadership development. Advocate for NPTL as a catalyst for expanding professionalism and improving education. Evaluations of the program indicate that the more positive the TLK experience, the stronger the teachers' leadership capabilities. Many teachers in Kazakhstan have seen tangible improvements in their leadership skills as a result of this initiative.

4. Conclusion

Although many countries have established comprehensive and mature strategies to support teachers' continuous professional development — through policy frameworks, institutional support, technological empowerment, and research-driven initiatives — challenges persist. Despite the growing emphasis on teachers as lifelong learners and leaders of lifelong learning, their professional development still faces significant systemic and contextual hurdles. On a macro level, teachers encounter broader societal and global challenges, including:

- 1) Migration, conflict, and crises.
- 2) Mental health concerns.
- 3) Alignment with labor market demands.
- 4) Climate change and inequality.
- 5) The rise of generative artificial intelligence, which disrupts traditional models of knowledge production, learning, and application.
- 6) Navigating an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) society.

On a micro level, challenges within the education sector itself include:

- 1) Fragmented, temporary, and inconsistent formal learning interventions that do not always align with individual or school needs.
- 2) Limited resources and accessibility issues.
- 3) Institutional barriers and resistance to change.
- 4) A narrow focus on specific skills rather than a broad, holistic approach to teacher development.

These challenges highlight the ongoing need for adaptive, context-sensitive solutions to ensure teachers receive effective, relevant, and sustainable professional development opportunities.

Looking ahead to future opportunities and challenges, it is essential to strengthen international cooperation, collect data and case studies from more countries, and enhance

collaboration among experts and scholars worldwide. These efforts will contribute to building a new social contract for the teaching profession and supporting the development of a high-quality education system that serves lifelong learning for all.

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