Journal of Law & Social Politics
Volume 4, Issue 1, 60-74
e_ISSN: 2807-6311
https://jolastic.id/index.php/jlsp/index
DOI: doi.org/10.59261/jlsp.v4i1.178

Engaging a School's Leadership Team in Re-envisioning Professional Learning for Public Secondary Educators through the PAR Experience in Cambodia

Sarom Mok[1*]
Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Ramy Chhun[2]
Ministry of Education, Youtth and Sport, Cambodia

Sophay Sim[3]
National AIDS Authority, Cambodia

Satya Yen[4]
NEAVEA OBROM Training Center, Cambodia

Sophal Yoeun[5]
Preah Sihamoniraja Budhist University, Cambodia

***Corresponding author:**
Sarom Mok, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. ✉ moksaromddg@gmail.com

Article Info :

Article history:
Received: January 21, 2026
Revised: February 25, 2026
Accepted: March 14, 2026

Keywords:
participatory action research; professional learning; school leadership team; public secondary educators; Cambodia

Abstract

Background: Professional development (PD) for public secondary educators is commonly one-size-fits-all, fragmented, and short-term, lacking a coherent vision for collaborative teaching and learning. Such opportunities rarely model the creativity and depth required in classrooms, leading teachers to doubt district-mandated sessions and limit participation to compulsory trainings. Despite growing interest in Participatory Action Research (PAR), little evidence exists on how it can reshape professional learning within Cambodian secondary schools.
Objective: This study examined the experiences of a school's leadership team as participants in PAR to identify the resources educators need to acquire the skills and knowledge that make a difference for students.
Methods: Grounded in teamwork, the PAR positioned participants as co-researchers who assessed resource needs, reviewed existing procedures, and devised workable plans; the study was conducted with participants rather than on them to bridge research and practice.
Results: Findings revealed the need for a more diversified, transparent, and strategic PD framework, including expanded online and hybrid options, clearer training requirements, differentiation by experience, subject, and role, stronger peer collaboration and learning committees, and attention to structural barriers such as workload, coverage, and funding.
Conclusion: A collaborative PAR approach empowers educators to own their PD, producing relevant, context-responsive systems that enhance teacher practice and student achievement.

To cite this article: Sarom Mok., Ramy Chhun, Sophay Sim, Satya Yen, Sophal Yoeun (2026). Engaging a School's Leadership Team in Re-envisioning Professional Learning for Public Secondary Educators through the PAR Experience in Cambodia. *Journal of Law & Social Politics*, 4 (1), 60- 74. https://doi.org/10.59261/jlsp.v4i1.178

INTRODUCTION

High-quality professional development for teachers should be one of the objectives of the Cambodian education system in order to guarantee successful classroom instruction and student involvement (Chamraeun et al., 2026; Hang, 2017; Lim, 2023; Ngah et al., 2023). The application of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in the design of professional learning for secondary educators was investigated in this dissertation research study. This study used participatory action research to investigate secondary teachers' experiences in creating professional development (PD) opportunities. The goal of the study is to determine what materials are required to give teachers the information and abilities they need to successfully navigate learning in the modern classroom. Professional and staff development programs are usually one-size-fits-all and have no effect on

teachers' teaching methods (Goodwin, 2010; Hang, 2017; Lim, 2023; Scherff, 2018; Talakoub, 2020). The sessions are content-focused, include active learning, model coaching, collaborations, feedback, and reflection, and are intended to endure over an extended period of time when professional development turns into professional learning (Desimone et al., 2002; Garet et al., 2001; Hang, 2017; Lim, 2023).

The school's goal is to help kids succeed, but the board of education must give our teachers chances for effective, ongoing professional development. How is student success determined by the school? The fundamental tenets of the goal are that educational achievement depends on upholding high standards for teachers and students, developing the curriculum, encouraging good instructional leadership, and nurturing progress for every student (Hang, 2017; Lim, 2023). Teachers must keep learning and relearning their profession in order to fulfil the demands of the ever-evolving public education system (Hang, 2017; Ngah et al., 2023).

The inadequacy of PD opportunities for secondary educators was the main issue of practice. Professional development is frequently one-size-fits-all, short-term, and divorced from the classroom setting. It also frequently lacks a vision of teaching and learning cooperatively. According to Darling-Hammond et al., (2017); Desimone, (2009), a PAR framework can be used to describe how teachers grow professionally as well as the circumstances that foster and maintain that development. The professional needs of the teacher, the student, and the classroom are the cornerstones of professional learning (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport – MoEYS, 2026), The MoEYS is urged to support the PD of their teachers (Hang, 2017; Lim, 2023).

In the past, educators have made an effort to motivate students through the curriculum and engage them through a variety of teaching strategies in the aim of enabling them to think more critically. Professional learning opportunities contribute significantly to this approach. Teachers frequently have concerns about the PD sessions at the building and sub-national levels because the people leading them lack subject-matter expertise (Hang, 2017; Lim, 2023). Due to time constraints, perceived lack of relevance to classroom practice, and a lack of incentives for voluntary participation, many educators only attend county-level required sessions and opt out of optional sessions or continuing education courses. The emphasis of this study is the gap between professional learning and educators' demands because educators have numerous duties and responsibilities both within and outside of the classroom (Admiraal et al., 2021; Colbert et al., n.d.; Morrissey, 2000; Nahal, 2010; Trust et al., 2016).

The literature on the PD and professional learning is extensive. Yet, research has indicated that many school districts still struggle to implement professional learning structures that effectively empower secondary educators and impact instructional practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2002; Timperley et al., 2007). The world is changing swiftly and educators are being urged to inspire kids with intellectual experiences and possibilities. Many schools still lack professional learning opportunities that significantly improve student outcomes, despite the fact that research consistently demonstrates that the relationship between teachers and student achievement is more significant than any other aspect of education (Francies et al., 2021; Goodwin, 2010; Hang, 2017; Lim, 2023).

Taken together, previous studies identify several recurring features of effective professional learning: sustained engagement, active learning, collaboration, teacher agency, and close alignment with classroom practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Timperley et al., 2007). However, this evidence also reveals a persistent implementation problem. Research commonly specifies what effective professional learning should include, while schools continue to rely on episodic and standardised programs that provide limited opportunities for educators to shape priorities, examine local barriers, or evaluate proposed improvements.

This tension is especially important in secondary education, where subject specialisation, diverse professional roles, scheduling demands, and unequal access make uniform provision particularly difficult. Within Cambodia, the available literature has primarily examined educational reform, school leadership, teacher morale, and broad professional-development needs (Hang, 2017; Lim, 2023). These studies establish the importance of leadership and continuing teacher learning, but they do not sufficiently explain how a school-based leadership team can collaboratively redesign professional learning through repeated cycles of inquiry, evidence review, action planning, and

reflection. Consequently, an empirical gap remains between national expectations for teacher development and a participatory process through which secondary educators can translate their situated experience into feasible school-level decisions.

The novelty of this study lies in applying PAR not merely as a method for collecting teacher opinions, but as a professional-learning and educational-leadership mechanism in which a Cambodian secondary-school leadership team served as co-researchers. The iterative process connected qualitative dialogue, a school-wide needs assessment, collective interpretation, and action planning. This design extends earlier PAR scholarship by showing how shared inquiry can expose the interaction among relevance, access, workload, communication, and decision-making within one professional-learning system, while producing recommendations grounded in the school's own organisational context.By virtue of its importance, the purpose of this study to investigate how public secondary educators perceived chances for the PD. By forming action groups to plan future professional learning opportunities at the middle and high school level in order to maximise teacher professional learning and produce more exceptional student achievement, the study sought to enhance the current support system and continue the learning process for public secondary educators through the PAR experience.

This will benefit the teachers, students, and community. Given its importance, four research questions are guided in this study: (1) In comparison to the PD, how do public secondary educators currently view professional learning?; (2) What is the relationship between public secondary education classes and the available PD opportunities?; (3) What effects does the current PD have on other areas of collaboration in public secondary schools?; and (4) What effects has participating in PAR had on teachers' perceptions of their methods and the learning of their students?. The study will enable Cambodian public secondary educators to take charge of their PD through the use of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design.

Teachers will be able to actively participate in the design, execution, and assessment of the professional learning format thanks to PAR's collaborative features. By forming action groups to create future professional learning opportunities that maximise teacher professional learning and result in more exceptional student achievement, the study sought to enhance the current support system to continue the learning process for teachers, thereby benefiting Cambodian teachers, students, and community. The study therefore contributes theoretically by conceptualising PAR as a form of distributed leadership and practitioner learning, and practically by offering a replicable process for identifying needs, negotiating priorities, and designing context-responsive professional-learning opportunities. Its expected implication is a shift from compliance-oriented provision toward sustained, teacher-informed improvement while retaining attention to the organisational constraints documented by participants.

METHOD

Research Design

With an emphasis on creating a community of cooperation, professional growth, and creativity, Participatory Action Research (PAR) was chosen to incorporate the perspectives of people who are directly affected by systemic PD. When PAR is used in an educational setting, teachers participate in ongoing learning, and systemic changes can be implemented to address problems impacting the school learning environment by including educators' perspectives and experiences (Kemmis et al., 2014). Through cooperation, action, and reflection, the PAR design fosters a sense of empowerment and ownership (Lapidot-Lefler, 2025).

Research Participants

The participants in the research study were members of the high school leadership team. The leadership team consists of the building level administration (principal, deputy principal, and head of student affairs), one representative from each curriculum area (career technical education, English, fine arts, math, science, social studies), counsellors, special education teachers, and community members on the school's staff. The school system currently employs fifty educators in secondary education, 7-12 grade classes, and tweenty on the leadership team. The leadership team was selected purposively because its members represented administrative, curricular, student-support, special-education, counselling, and community perspectives and were directly involved in

school-level professional-learning decisions.

Participation in the PAR focus group was voluntary. Fifteen members contributed to the initial participant questionnaire, while eighteen educators completed the subsequent school-wide needs assessment. Further demographic detail was not collected consistently and is therefore not inferred or reported. The scope and aim of the PAR study were deliberately defined by a number of delimitations. First, only secondary teachers in a single public school (grades 7–12) could participate in the study. This limit was set in order to guarantee a reasonable sample size and to concentrate on the particular PD requirements of educators who work with teenage students. Since their curricular structures, PD priorities, and instructional environments differ greatly, elementary school teachers were excluded.

Research Instruemnt and Data Colllection Procedures

Within practitioner research, PAR is a particular research methodology that emphasises empowerment and participation for individuals impacted by the research (Organising Engagement, 2025). By involving stakeholders in every stage of the action-reflection cycle, PAR fosters collaboration (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009). The PAR approach involves conducting research with participants rather than on them. In order to implement future improvements in the PD and learning possibilities offered, the PAR finished the seven action planning processes. The PAR design was used to get insights from the participants, see professional learning from their points of view, produce qualitative data, and give secondary educators a sense of empowerment and responsibility for upcoming professional learning opportunities.

The PAR talks' results might be utilised as a method to comprehend other people's perspectives (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). Participants in PAR were free to express their opinions on personal issues using their own language. In order to prioritise the participants' concerns in the dissertation study (Menter et al., 2011), researchers might gather comprehensive data with descriptions and examples in the participants' language (Leavy, 2022). After regular school hours, the PAR convened in person as needed; these meetings were audio recorded and written. To guarantee that all input and comments are recorded for research purposes, the PAR meetings were recorded to create a transcript. An email and password mechanism protected the audio recordings and textual data. Word clouds (Microsoft Suites Pro Word Cloud) and member checks were utilised with the transcripts to guarantee triangulation.

Members of the school's leadership team volunteered for the PAR focus group. The results thus represent the experiences of secondary educators who are already inclined toward PD and cooperation. Authors worried about participating actively in the PAR without directing or influencing its members or activities. In doing son, the seven steps of action planning were followed in the design of this study: (1) Determining the issue or issues related to the available chances for PD; (2) Creating a cooperative strategy to deal with the issue or issues; (3) Gathering information using a combination of quantitative techniques using questionnaires or needs assessments and qualitative techniques from the PAR meetings; (4) Examining the information gathered; (5) Creating answers for each issue; (6) Providing middle and high school teachers with solutions; and (7) Assessing and considering the acts performed, respectively.

Data Analysis Procedures

Throughout the whole study investigation, data analysis was ongoing. The PAR focus group format made it possible for the participants to examine data together and spot recurring patterns. PAR was able to analyse the data from their meetings with the use of Microsoft Suite Tools, Pro Word Cloud, and Forms built-in analysis. By taking these actions, the common professional learning trends and themes found by the PAR became more apparent. A plan for professional learning opportunities was created based on data findings. The PAR facilitated and concentrated on the process of change with reference to professional learning at the high school throughout the study, acting as change agents. A change agent is a person or group that starts and oversees change inside an organization (Lunenburg, 2010). With an emphasis on internal processes including relationships, communications, and decision-making, the PAR operated as an organization-development type change agent (Lunenburg, 2010).

Qualitative analysis proceeded iteratively across the five PAR sessions. The authors first read

the transcripts while listening to the recordings to check completeness, then identified meaning units related to participants' experiences of PD, perceived barriers, preferred learning formats, collaboration, access, and the perceived effects of PAR. Similar units were grouped into subthemes and broader themes, which were reviewed collectively during PAR meetings against the transcript excerpts and participant language. Word clouds were used only as a supplementary visual indication of frequently occurring terms rather than as the sole basis for thematic interpretation. Member checking allowed participants to confirm, qualify, or contest the developing interpretations.

Triangulation occurred across meeting transcripts, audio recordings, the participant questionnaire, the quantitative and open-ended needs-assessment responses, and the post-PAR assessment. Quantitative items were summarised descriptively using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, whereas open-ended responses and meeting transcripts were analysed thematically. Integration took place during the fourth and fifth PAR sessions: participants compared the descriptive survey patterns with qualitative themes, examined convergence and divergence, and used the combined evidence to prioritise recommendations. Thus, numerical results indicated the prevalence or relative strength of needs, while qualitative evidence explained the organisational and instructional reasons underlying those patterns.

By adhering to the four categories of standards credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability trustworthiness was maintained throughout the dissertation research project. Credibility was addressed by using a variety of data collection methods. As a result, it made the study more transferable by enabling detailed explanations and specifics of the research findings. Through the research committee's inquiry audit, the reliability of the dissertation study was verified. An audit will show how reliable a study is (Nowell et al., 2017).

Ethical Considerations

The research committee accepted this study in order to guarantee the participants' ethical protection. Additionally, the targeted schools gave authros' permission to finish the study. The leadership team members were given a copy of the informed consent form and a PAR participation questionnaire prior to the PAR study's commencement. Only authrors had access to the demographic data and raw data. Pseudonyms were used for all notes and published works by PAR participants. Participants had the option to remove any statements from the transcripts or choose not to answer any questions during the research session.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Analysis of the Five Sessions with the PAR

During the data gathering portion of this study, there were five sessions with the PAR. The PAR filled out a questionnaire on the building level leadership team, experience in the Cambodian public school system, and demographics prior to the first session. This information was previously given under the PAR action group. All 15 partiicipants provided an answer to the last question on the PAR participant questionnaire. Table 1 shows the three themes that emerged from the coding of the replies.

Table 1. Presenting the perspectives professional development meaning

No.	Core Themes	Core Sub-themes
1.	PD as ongoing improvement	1.1 Ongoing PD 1.2 Keeping up with recommended practices 1.3 The development of professional identities and competence
2.	Practicality, relevance, and influence on education	2.1 Learning that is applicable and useful 2.2 Well-planned and significant experiences 2.3 Increasing student performance and instruction
3.	Teacher-focused PD	3.1 Personal relevance and teacher autonomy 3.2 Working together and networking professionally

Professional development was viewed as an ongoing, teacher-centered learning process that is pertinent, useful, and responsive to changing instructional needs with the aim of enhancing teaching practice and student learning, to sum up the remarks made by the PAR members.

First Session of with the PAR

During the first PAR session, members were given an overview of the study and research procedures, and the PAR participation questionnaire was utilised to explore members' own interpretations of PD and learning. Using Microsoft Suite Pro Word Cloud, listening to the audio recording, and reading the transcript of the first PAR meeting, the following trends were identified.

Figure 1. Presenting the work cloude for the first PAR session

It is ttherefore the Figure 1 above includes: (1) Rather of being instructional or growth-oriented, PD is compliance-driven; (2) Teachers prefer job-integrated, ongoing learning to required training procedures; (3) Different positions have unequal and inconsistent access to professional learning; (4) Structural inefficiencies actively prevent people from participating in professional learning; (5) While desired, collaborative learning is neither systematically encouraged nor incentivized; (6) Rather than assisting educators, teachers believe that PD programs reinforce hierarchy; (7) Why Content for PD frequently does not match the instructional contexts of teachers; (8) A decline in motivation and morale is a result of ineffective PD; and (9) PAR was seen as a respectable and effective reform strategy.

A pattern of discontent with conventional PD was identified during the first PAR conference. PAR members expressed a wish for more teacher voice as well as disparities in PD, access, and support. The necessity of cooperative, discipline-specific, job-embedded learning opportunities backed by open systems and shared leadership was underlined by PAR members. The prominence

of terms associated with requirements, time, access, relevance, and collaboration in the visual data should therefore be interpreted as an interconnected system rather than a list of isolated complaints: compliance expectations and logistical constraints reduced teachers' capacity to engage, while limited role-specific content weakened perceived instructional value. In contrast, the recurrence of teacher voice and collaboration indicated the conditions under which participants believed professional learning could regain legitimacy.

Second Session of with the PAR

The topic of the second PAR meeting was how to deal with the professional growth and learning difficulty or issues. By analysing the audio recording, reading the conference transcript, and utilising Microsoft Suite Pro Word Cloud, the following patterns were found, as showen in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Presenting the work cloude for the second PAR session

Figure 2 displays: (1) Teachers like professional development that advances us, fosters growth, and produces useful classroom applications; (2) It was believed that the change from "professional development" to "professional learning" was primarily semantic rather than structural; (3) It was often believed that PD was repeated rather than ongoing and progressive; (4) Secondary and elective teachers are disproportionately disadvantaged by PD, which lacks subject-specific differentiation; (5) Teachers have become disengaged as a result of repeated requests for their opinions without any action; (6) Professional learning options are not equally accessible due to procedural and financial barriers; (7) The logistics of PD contribute to stress and a lack of professional respect; (8) Attendance problems are not just a result of a lack of enthusiasm, but also of structural and workload pressures; (9) Scheduling and calendar choices have a detrimental effect on attendance and morale in the workplace; and (10) Models for delivering PD undermine teachers' sense of professionalism and run counter to adult learning theory.

Concerns regarding the structure, equality, and applicability of present PD procedures were identified by PAR. While outlining systemic obstacles that prevent meaningful engagement, such as centralised decision-making, budgetary limitations, and logistical difficulties, PAR members stressed the necessity of ongoing, discipline-specific, and collaborative professional learning. The decision to perform a needs assessment with a PD focus was made at the end of the PAR meeting. In order to aid in the creation of the needs assessment, PAR members were asked to create questions or tools. The second-session word cloud reinforced this interpretation by showing that participants linked growth and practical classroom use with structural changes in scheduling, access, and decision-making. Its analytical value lies not in word frequency alone, but in how the recurring terms guided the group from diagnosing dissatisfaction toward constructing the needs-assessment questions used in the next PAR cycle.

Third Session of with the PAR

The creation and execution of a needs assessment for the fifty educational professionals employed at the middle and high school levels was the main emphasis of the third PAR meeting. The primary goal of the PAR was to design a needs assessment that would collect ideas and opinions in order to hear from those who are directly affected by the systemic PD. Table 2 shows how a 14-question needs assessment was developed based on PAR's concerns from earlier discussions.

Table 2. Presenting the PAR issues driving needs evaluation

No.	The PAR Issues	The PAR Sub-issues
1.	Structural obstacles to successful career advancement	1.1 Organisational difficulties and communication gaps 1.2 Time restraints and professional exhaustion 1.3 Inequality and inconsistency between strand
2.	PD focused on teachers	2.1 The value of listening to teachers and shared ownership 2.2 PD's relevance and usefulness 2.3 Teachers are responsible for identifying needs (no prior needs assessment). 2.4 PD that is not conventional
3.	Adaptable and long-lasting approaches for PD	Delivering professional growth

Fourth Session of with the PAR

In order to make sure the tool was prepared for distribution to other educators, the fourth PAR meeting was devoted to examining the needs assessment. Each of the 14 questions was examined at the conference for typographical problems, ranges for years and professional responsibilities, and clarity to make it easier for participants to understand them. To make sure the PAR's concerns from earlier meetings were taken into consideration, each question was examined. It was decided to give educational specialists ten days to complete the needs assessment.

Table 3. Presenting the views of teachers on PD activities during the previous 12 months

No.	Statement	PD	
		M	S.D.
1.	Improved your understanding of the subject of certificates	2.10	0.88
2.	Enhanced your abilities based on studies of successful methods	2.16	0.56
3.	Supplied the necessary abilities to evaluate and apply facts in decision-making when collaborating with coworkers and students.	2.38	0.61
4.	Enabled you to collaborate successfully with community partners and parents to inspire others to strive for educational greatness.	2.38	0.73
5.	Gave you the information and abilities to think wisely.	2.21	0.91
6.	Intensified your introspection and self-evaluation of excellent methods and improved your PD.	2.10	0.54

The needs assessment respondents were asked to use six descriptive statements to express how they felt about PD sessions they had attended in the previous 12 months, as Table 4 illustrates. With mean scores ranging from 2.10 to 2.38 on a five-point scale (5 = excellent, 4 = good, 3 = fair, 2 = poor, and 1 = extremely poor), teachers evaluated the overall quality of PD sessions during the previous 12 months as low to moderate. According to these findings, teachers believe that the PD sessions they have attended in the past 12 months have not been sufficient to enable significant

instructional growth and reflective practice. This raises questions about the applicability and significance of the existing professional development offers.

Respondents to the needs assessment were asked to discuss any fresh concepts or tactics they had learned while attending the PD courses. The majority of respondents said that sessions did not much improve their professional practice, reflecting the low perceived impact of existing PD experiences. Fiforty-four percent of the respondents said "no," while one person said "nothing life changing." Particularly for secondary and non-core content teachers, respondents said that PD was repetitious, review-based, or irrelevant to their field. Two respondents pointed out that possibilities for PD were frequently focused on primary education, which decreased their applicability and efficacy.

Compliance-based subjects, such required reporting, are often the focus of PD, which respondents regard as significant but not transformational to instructional practice. Although these seminars reaffirmed necessary information, they were not seen as offering fresh approaches or significant career advancement. Particularly in areas pertaining to social-emotional development, emotional control, and support for students with special needs, including de-escalation techniques, eleven percent of the respondents indicated partial or temporary gains. When compared to other offerings, these sessions were mentioned as being more useful and pertinent. Respondents noted that although some sessions were beneficial, they were neither "life-changing" or consistently effective. Positive replies were few and frequently qualified.

In order to provide PD sessions, the final four needs assessment questions asked respondents about their preferences for learning formats, delivery methods, time of day, and season. Teachers gave outside-of-district PD the highest rating, followed by online academic courses, peer observation with feedback, and professional learning communities/collaborative planning. The lowest grades, however, went to book studies and district-led PD.

Fifth Session of with the PAR

The examination and interpretation of the needs assessment data was the main topic of the fifth PAR meeting. Over the course of ten days, eighteen people finished the needs assessment. According to the data, PD programs offered by the school district or outside of it within the previous 12 months received low ratings for quality. Individual perceptions of high-quality professional learning formats were the subject of a thorough discussion among PAR members. According to the needs assessment results, professional learning communities (PLCs), collaborative planning, and external PD possibilities (such as universities, state departments, and professional organisations) received the highest ratings. The perception of online academic courses was more indifferent. Peer observation unexpectedly received a high ranking, which PAR members may attribute to their dissatisfaction with the county office's or the building level administration's evaluation procedures as well as their need for input from peers who are familiar with their educational setting.

The barriers or difficulties people might encounter when putting the knowledge they have learned from PD sessions into practice such as a lack of time, irrelevant or non-subject-specific training, poor communication from administration, inadequate access to data, technological malfunctions, and staffing and substitute shortages were the focus of PAR members' potential justifications for the responses. During the fifth session, PAR members expressed a strong desire for PD sessions to take place during contractual hours, such as pre-school-year sessions, early-release days, or designated PD days. Due to work-life balance, family obligations, and secondary employment, PAR members voiced opposition to after-school or nighttime PD. According to the results of the needs assessment, most respondents agreed that they would be open to participating in PD during regular work hours but not outside of them.

PAR members concurred with the responses of the needs assessments regarding the necessity for enhanced clarity concerning compulsory training, including delineating state versus county requirements, the frequency of training completion, and the extent of flexibility permitted for teacher-chosen PD. Suboptimal scheduling practices—characterized by prolonged sessions, ineffective time utilisation, and redundant content—were seen as significant sources of irritation. PAR members have examined the financial and logistical obstacles to external professional growth. The needs evaluation indicated ambiguity over reimbursement procedures, out-of-pocket expenses,

substitute coverage, and contradictory instructions on necessary forms. These obstacles were perceived as hindering engagement in high-quality professional growth.

Analysis of Assessing of PAR Experience

Participants received a link to Microsoft Office Suites Forms, which functioned as an assessment of their PAR experience, after the most recent PAR meeting. After completing the four-question assessment, seven participants gave their PAR experience a mean score of 4.40 (5 = extremely valuable, 4 = very valuable, 3 = moderately valuable, 2 = slightly valuable, and 1 = not at all valuable), with four PAR participants rating the experience as extremely valuable. Because of their involvement with the PAR, participants reported a change in their views on PD, realising that relevant, meaningful professional learning can enhance student learning and instructional improvement. The Pro Word Cloud generated from the responses is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Presenting the effects of PAR engagement on instructional strategies and student learning

Additionally, they reported being more conscious of the disparities in access to PD, being able to identify their own learning requirements more clearly, and having a better grasp of the professional development procedures and issues. Participants in PAR raised doubts regarding the effectiveness of present PD, pointing out that there is little coordination between schools and little instructional influence. They did, however, also suggest that teacher-driven, collaborative professional learning could enhance PD procedures and promote a more encouraging, growth-oriented culture in the future. One PAR member said, "*I thought the meetings were insightful. We were allowed to discuss our ideas and professional growth experiences, and I think the study will be able to improve those experiences*."Another said, "*I believe that teachers need to have greater input. I believed this group focused on our skills*."

Discussion

Cambodiaan public secondary educators' perspectives on their professional growth were revealed by this PAR. In order to improve the learning process and promote a community of cooperation, PD, and creativity, the PAR design enabled the voices of people directly impacted by systemic PD to be heard. The dissertation research design gave the PAR participants a feeling of empowerment and ownership. The research questions for this PAR research study serve as a reference for the disscussion.

Cambodian Public Secondary Educators currently View Professional Learning

Members of PAR did not distinguish between PD and professional learning. In order to improve teaching practices and student learning, members viewed PD as an ongoing, teacher-centered learning process that is applicable, useful, and responsive to changing instructional demands. According to PAR members, the change in nomenclature from PD to professional learning is merely semantic rather than structural. PD that "moves us forward," fosters growth, and produces useful classroom applications is not the same as traditional, one-size-fits-all methods that have little impact on teacher practice or student outcomes (Goodwin et al., 2024).

Responses to the needs assessment indicated that the PD sessions they had attended in the previous 12 months were irrelevant and ineffective, and they did not much improve their professional practice. Because of this, the PAR members emphasised the significance of teacher-centered PD that is, teacher-driven need identification, shared ownership, relevance, and practicality instead of traditional PD. Particularly for secondary and non-core content teachers, respondents said that PD was repetitious, review-based, or irrelevant to their field. Educators, PAR members, and needs assessment respondents articulated a substantial contrast between the ideal characteristics of PD namely, relevance, practicality, and collaboration—and their existing experiences. Teacher autonomy, job and discipline relevance, and collaborative opportunities were fundamental to this conceptualisation.

Relationship Between Cambodian Public Secondary Education Classes and the Available PD Opportunities

Results from the PAR participants and the needs assessment responders reveal that existing PD options are inadequately linked to secondary classroom practices, mostly due to their compliance-driven framework and insufficient response to teacher feedback. In accordance with the literature on effective professional learning, which underscores teacher agency, contextual relevance, and instructional alignment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009), participants characterised PD as a duty rather than a means of enhancing instruction. The generalised and non-specific nature of PD content further restricted its relevance to secondary classrooms, especially for non-core content educators, corroborating previous research that underscores the significance of subject-specific and job-embedded learning (Garet et al., 2001; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). One of the biggest obstacles to implementation turned out to be the lack of relevancy. One-size-fits-all, whole-building PD programs with elementary-focused content limit the application of acquired tactics and lead to few planned deployments.

Furthermore, effective classroom impact was limited by the lack of prolonged, collaborative, and practice-embedded professional learning structures, which is consistent with the idea that continuous professional learning is essential to improving instruction (DuFour, R., & Eaker, 2009; Timperley, 2011). The results of the needs assessment, which showed that teachers reported little improvement in professional practice, repeated content, and little instructional impact, further corroborated this separation. According to studies, this misalignment led to a drop in teacher morale, which compromises implementation ability and instructional engagement (Ingersoll et al., 2014). All of these results point to a limited relationship between PD and secondary classroom instruction when it lacks teacher voice, contextual relevance, and structural support for cooperation.

Effects of the PD on Other Areas of Collaboration in Cambodian Public Secondary Schools

Participants in PAR voiced doubts regarding the effectiveness of present PD, pointing out that there is little collaboration between schools and little instructional influence. Teachers stated that they were regularly asked for their opinions on PD, but they thought that there was little follow-up, which lowered their motivation, trust, and morale. Mutual respect, cooperation, support, openness, enjoyment, and including adult learners in the planning are all components of the adult learning process (Knowles, 1984). The results of the study showed that in order to enhance PD procedures and promote a more encouraging, growth-oriented culture going forward, respondents would prefer collaborative, teacher-driven professional learning. According to Taylor, (2024) research, teachers view PD as crucial but find it inconsistent.

This underscores the need for ongoing, pertinent, and cooperative learning opportunities that are in line with their particular subject areas and student populations. Nothing in a school has a greater influence on children than the professional and personal development of their instructors (Barth, 1990). As previously shown, 67% of respondents said they preferred teacher collaboration for professional development (e.g., professional learning committees, collaborative planning). There will be both professional and personal improvement when the PD sessions offer content-focused, active learning, model coaching, partnerships, feedback, and reflection and are planned to last over an extended period of time (Desimone et al., 2002; Garet et al., 2001).

Effects of Participating in PAR on Teachers' Perceptions of Methods and the Learning of Students

According to Friere, (1970); Leavy, (2022); Mertens, (2008), the PAR design increased educators' voices in identifying and resolving professional learning gaps within the school system by fostering a collaborative relationship between educators and the researcher. Because of their involvement in the process, participants in the PAR reported a change in their views on PD, realising that relevant and meaningful professional learning can successfully improve student outcomes and instructional practice. A greater awareness of disparities in access to PD, a precise assessment of learning needs, and an awareness of the state's PD procedures and issues were all noted.

According to Hellerich, (2024), teacher participation in PAR fosters empowerment and agency, allowing teachers to jointly invent and mould their teaching methods. PAR claimed that their encounter with transformational invigorated them. According to Kemmis et al., (2014); Leavy, (2022), establishing research collaborations with whom the research matters practically could lead to an empowering experience. Participants saw PAR as a legitimate and empowering method to PD reform because it integrates theory, practice, action, and reflection to cooperatively address problems to improve the environment.

These outcomes can be explained by three mechanisms within the PAR process. First, repeated cycles of dialogue and reflection converted individual dissatisfaction into a shared diagnosis, reducing the isolation associated with fragmented PD experiences. Second, the leadership team's participation connected teacher knowledge with organisational decision-making, allowing practical constraints such as workload, scheduling, substitute coverage, and reimbursement to be considered alongside instructional relevance. Third, the needs assessment supplied a common evidence base that enabled participants to move from expressing preferences to prioritising feasible actions. PAR therefore contributed uniquely by integrating voice, evidence, and planning within the same improvement process.

The findings are consistent with international research emphasising sustained, collaborative, job-embedded, and teacher-responsive professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Timperley, 2011). However, the Cambodian setting foregrounded the combined influence of centralised decision-making, uneven access across roles and subject areas, financial procedures, staffing limitations, and scheduling pressures. These contextual conditions suggest that transferring an internationally recognised model of effective professional learning requires organisational adaptation rather than simple program adoption. The contribution of this study is therefore to show that PAR can function as a locally responsive form of distributed educational leadership: it creates a deliberative space in which professional expertise and administrative constraints are jointly examined before improvement priorities are established.

CONCLUSION

This PAR illuminated how public secondary educators in Cambodia perceive their own professional growth. By giving voice to those directly affected by systemic PD, the collaborative design fostered cooperation, creativity, and a sense of empowerment, positioning teachers and administrators as co-owners of reform. Theoretically, the study extends PAR by demonstrating its value as a legitimate, empowering pathway toward context-responsive professional learning in a Cambodian secondary setting.

These findings should be read in light of certain limitations: the study was conducted in a single school with a relatively small participant group, which constrains the transferability of the results. Future research should therefore validate these findings across multiple Cambodian schools, spanning urban and rural contexts, and in other educational systems. Further inquiry could also examine subject-specific and differentiated PD and its long-term effects on student outcomes and teacher retention, strengthening the evidence base for participatory approaches to professional learning reform.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to sincerely thank each and every participant for the intellectual assistance that made this study possible. The authors also thank colleagues, practitioners, and academics for their insightful contributions. Additionally, we would like to express our gratitude to the peer reviewers for their helpful criticism and recommendations, which have greatly improved the calibre and lucidity of this work.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Sarom Mok helped with the idea for the study, the gathering of data, the legal analysis, and the first draft of the manuscript. He also contributed to data interpretation, manuscript revision, and final article approval, while Ramy Chhun, Sophay Sim and Satya Yen contributed to the theoretical framework, methodological supervision, and critical evaluation. The final text was reviewed and approved by all authors.

REFERENCES

Admiraal, W., Schenke, W., De Jong, L., Emmelot, Y., & Sligte, H. (2021). Schools as professional learning communities: what can schools do to support professional development of their teachers? *Professional Development in Education*, *47*(4), 684–698. https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2019.1665573

Barth, R. S. (1990). *Improving schools from within: Teachers, parents, and principals can make the difference*.

Brydon-Miller, M., & Maguire, P. (2009). Participatory action research: contributions to the development of practitioner inquiry in education. *Educational Action Research*, *17*(1), 79–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790802667469

Chamraeun, S., Mok, S., Hor, M., Chhun, R., & Em, S. (2026). The influence of academic leadership styles on school culture within secondary resource schools in Cambodia. *Journal of General Education and Humanities*, *5*(2). https://doi.org/10.58421/gehu.v5i2.887

Colbert, J., Brown, R., Choi, S.(2008.). An investigation of the impacts of teacher-driven professional development on pedagogy and student learning. *JSTORJA Colbert, RS Brown, SH Choi, S ThomasTeacher Education Quarterly, 2008•JSTOR*. Retrieved August 22, 2026, from https://www.jstor.org/stable/23479228

Dana, N., & Yendol-Hoppey, D. (2009). *The reflective educator's guide to classroom research: Learning to teach and teaching to learn through practitioner inquiry*.

Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. (2017). Effective teacher professional development. *ERICL Darling-Hammond, ME Hyler, M GardnerLearning Policy Institute, 2017•ERIC*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED606743

Desimone, L. M. (2009). Improving Impact Studies of Teachers' Professional Development: Toward Better Conceptualizations and Measures. *Educational Researcher*, *38*(3), 181–199. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X08331140

Desimone, L. M., Porter, A. C., Garet, M. S., Yoon, S., Birman, B. F., & Kwang, M. S. G. (2002). Effects of professional development on teachers' instruction: Results from a three-year longitudinal study. *Journals.Sagepub.ComLM Desimone, AC Porter, MS Garet, KS Yoon, BF BirmanEducational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 2002•journals.Sagepub.Com*, *24*(2), 81–112. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737

DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (2009). *Professional learning communities at work tm: best practices for enhancing students achievement.*

Francies, C., Glover, S. (2021). Enhancing Teacher Preparation through Clinical Experience. Policy Brief. *ERICC Francies, S Glover, C JamiesonEducation Commission of the States, 2021•ERIC*.

Friere, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.*

Garet, M. S., Porter, A. C., Desimone, L., Birman, B. F., & Yoon, K. S. (2001). What Makes Professional Development Effective? Results From a National Sample of Teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, *38*(4), 915–945. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312038004915

Goodwin, B. (2010). Changing the Odds for Student Success: What Matters Most. A Special Issue of" Changing Schools". *ERICB GoodwinMid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), 2010•ERIC*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED544634

Goodwin, B. (2024). Designing Better Professional Learning with the Brain in Mind. *ERICB Goodwin, K RouleauMcREL International, 2024•ERIC*.

Guskey, T. (2002). Does it make a difference? Evaluating professional development. *Uknowledge.Uky.Edu*.

Hang, C. (2017). *Education management reform strategies for enhancing the quality citizenship in Cambodia*. https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/chulaetd/681/

Hellerich, K. (2024). Leading Participatory Action Research for Teacher Agency. *Journal of Educational Leadership in Action*, *9*(2). https://doi.org/10.62608/2164-1102.1152

Ingersoll, R., Merrill, L. (2014). Seven Trends: The Transformation of the Teaching Force. Updated April 2014. CPRE Report.# RR-80. *ERICR Ingersoll, L Merrill, D StuckeyConsortium for Policy Research in Education, 2014•ERIC*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED566879

Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Nixon, R. (2014). The action research planner: Doing critical participatory action research. *The Action Research Planner: Doing Critical Participatory Action Research*, 1–200. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-4560-67-2

Lapidot-Lefler, N. (2025). Empowering connections: participatory action research in teacher education with vulnerable youth. *Educational Action Research*, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2025.2590022

Leavy, P. (2022). *Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches*.

Lim, S. (2023). *Impact of school directors' leadership behaviors on teachers' morale: A case study of secondary resource schools in Cambodia.*

Lunenburg, F. (2010). Managing change: The role of the change agent. *Mlsu.Ac.InFC LunenburgInternational Journal of Management, Business, and Administration, 2010•mlsu.Ac.In*, *13*. https://www.mlsu.ac.in/econtents/1081_Managing Change The Role of Change Agent Unit-3.pdf

Menter, I., Elliot, D., Hulme, M., Lewin, J., & Lowden, K. (2011). *A guide to practitioner research in education*. https://sk.sagepub.com/book/mono/preview/a-guide-to-practitioner-research-in-education.pdf

Mertens, D. (2008). *Transformative research and evaluation*.

Morrissey, M. (2000). *Professional learning communities: An ongoing exploration*. https://allthingsplc.info/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/plc-ongoing.pdf

Nahal, S. P. (2010). *Voices from the field: Perspectives of first-year teachers on the disconnect between teacher preparation programs and the realities of the classroom*.

Ngah, N. S., Abdullah, N. L., Mohd Suki, N., & Kasim, M. A. (2023). Does servant leadership affect organisational citizenship behaviour? Mediating role of affective commitment and moderating role of role identity of young volunteers in non-profit organisations. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, *44*(6), 681–701. https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-11-2022-0484

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *Journals.Sagepub.ComLS Nowell, JM Norris, DE White, NJ MoulesInternational Journal of Qualitative Methods, 2017•journals.Sagepub.Com*, *16*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Opfer, V. D., & Pedder, D. (2011). Conceptualizing Teacher Professional Learning. *Review of Educational Research*, *81*(3), 376–407. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311413609

Scherff, L. (2018). *Distinguishing professional learning from professional development.*

Talakoub, C. (2020). Digital Professional Learning for K-12 Teachers: Literature Review and Analysis. Knowledge Brief. *ERICC TalakoubRegion 15 Comprehensive Center, 2020•ERIC*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=eD610097

Taylor, S. (2024). *Examining PK-12 Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Development's Effect on Improving Instructional Practice and Student Learning*.

Timperley, H. (2011). *Realizing the power of professional learning*.

Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., & Fung, I. (2007). Teacher Professional Learning and Development. *Chamilo.Ektproject.Eu*. https://chamilo.ektproject.eu/courses/POTUSHIRE2/tincan/MIE-Unit-2.-Action-Research-in-the-Classroom/resources/1d0b95timperleyetal2007.pdf

Trust, T., Krutka, D. (2016). "Together we are better": Professional learning networks for teachers. *ElsevierT Trust, DG Krutka, JP CarpenterComputers & Education, 2016•Elsevier*. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S036013151630135X