

Teacher Motivation and Retention in Rural Secondary Schools: Evidence from Chongwe District, Zambia

Jacqueline Siansia¹, Lukonde John¹, Muduli Regina¹, Mufalali Simasiku Mwiya^{1*}, Mwiya Bruce¹

¹ Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia

* Corresponding Author

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Abstract

Teacher retention remains a major challenge in rural schools, undermining educational quality, instructional continuity, and learner outcomes. This study examined the motivational factors influencing teacher retention in selected rural secondary schools in Chongwe District, Zambia. Guided by Job Embeddedness Theory, the study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design involving 17 purposively selected participants comprising teachers and school administrators from three rural secondary schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teacher retention remains low, with many teachers perceiving rural postings as temporary assignments. Key motivational factors influencing retention included working conditions, salaries and incentives, housing and social services, administrative support, and professional development opportunities. The study further established a strong positive relationship between teacher motivation and teacher retention, demonstrating that teachers were more likely to remain where these motivational needs were adequately addressed. Participants recommended integrated interventions, including improved remuneration, better staff accommodation, enhanced school infrastructure, supportive leadership, timely payment of hardship allowances, and expanded opportunities for professional development. The findings support Job Embeddedness Theory by demonstrating that these factors strengthen teachers' organisational fit, interpersonal links, and perceived sacrifices associated with leaving rural schools. The study concludes that sustainable teacher retention requires comprehensive policy interventions addressing financial, professional, organisational, and community-related factors simultaneously. The findings provide context-specific evidence to inform teacher retention policies and contribute to efforts aimed at improving workforce stability and the quality of education in rural Zambia.

1. Introduction

Teacher retention has become a critical concern in educational policy and practice because of its direct influence on educational quality, learner achievement, and institutional effectiveness (Ingersoll, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006). Education systems rely heavily on competent and committed teachers who provide consistent instruction, foster positive learning environments, and contribute to overall school development (Hattie, 2009; OECD, 2019). Consequently, the ability of schools to retain qualified teachers is fundamental to ensuring continuity in teaching and learning and sustaining improvements in educational outcomes.

Despite its importance, teacher retention remains a major challenge across many countries, particularly in rural and remote areas where living and working conditions are often less favourable than those in urban settings (Mulkeen, 2010; UNESCO, 2021; Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007). High teacher turnover disrupts curriculum implementation, weakens institutional stability, reduces instructional continuity, and ultimately compromises learner achievement and school effectiveness (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013; Kraft, Marinell, & Yee, 2016). Beyond its educational consequences, teacher attrition also places significant financial and administrative burdens on education systems through the continuous recruitment, induction, and training of replacement teachers (Guarino et al., 2006).

The challenge is particularly pronounced in developing countries despite considerable investments in teacher recruitment, training, and deployment. Existing research consistently shows that many teachers leave rural schools due to inadequate motivation arising from poor remuneration, unfavourable working conditions, limited opportunities for career advancement, and insufficient institutional support (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007; Mulkeen, 2010; Guajardo, 2011). These conditions often result in low job satisfaction, reduced organizational commitment, increased absenteeism, diminished productivity, and a greater likelihood of teachers requesting transfers or leaving the profession altogether (Ingersoll, 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Consequently, rural schools continue to experience shortages of qualified and experienced teachers, thereby widening disparities in educational quality and learner outcomes between rural and urban communities (UNESCO, 2021; Darling-Hammond, 2017).

In Zambia, retaining teachers in rural schools has become an increasingly important policy concern for government, educational planners, and development partners. Although several initiatives, including rural hardship allowances and targeted teacher recruitment programmes, have been introduced to encourage teachers to serve in underserved areas, retention rates remain relatively low in many districts (Chama-Chiliba et al., 2024). Studies conducted in Zambia reveal that teachers in rural schools continue to face numerous challenges, including inadequate housing, poor school infrastructure, limited access to healthcare services, poor road networks, social isolation, and restricted opportunities for professional development and promotion (Inambao, 2022). These challenges negatively affect teacher morale, job satisfaction, and professional commitment, reducing their willingness to remain in rural postings (Munthali, J. 2019). As a result, many rural schools continue to experience persistent staffing shortages that undermine effective curriculum delivery and learner achievement.

Among the districts experiencing these challenges is Chongwe District, where rural secondary schools continue to struggle with retaining qualified teachers. Teachers assigned to remote communities frequently seek transfers to urban schools where working and living conditions are perceived to be more favourable. Such movements create instability within schools, disrupt instructional continuity, and weaken institutional effectiveness (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Although previous studies have examined teacher motivation and retention in Zambia more broadly, limited empirical evidence exists on how motivational factors influence teacher retention specifically within rural secondary schools in Chongwe District.

This study therefore addresses this knowledge gap by examining the influence of motivational factors on teacher retention in selected rural secondary schools in Chongwe District, Zambia. Specifically, it seeks to explore how key motivational factors shape teachers' decisions to remain in or leave rural postings and to identify strategies that can enhance teacher motivation and promote long-term retention in rural secondary schools.

Research Objectives

- To examine the status of teacher retention in selected rural secondary schools in Chongwe District, Zambia.
- To explore the motivational factors affecting teachers in rural secondary schools in Chongwe District, Zambia.
- To examine how motivational factors influence teachers' decisions to remain in or leave rural secondary schools in Chongwe District, Zambia.
- To identify strategies for enhancing teacher motivation and improving teacher retention in rural secondary schools in Chongwe District, Zambia.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Job Embeddedness Theory

This study is anchored on Job Embeddedness Theory, developed by Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, and Erez (2001). The theory was introduced to explain why employees remain in their organizations, shifting attention from the traditional emphasis on why employees leave. The authors argue that employee retention is influenced by a broad network of organizational and community-related factors that embed individuals within their jobs. Rather than focusing solely on job satisfaction or organizational commitment, the theory proposes that employees remain in an organization because they are connected to their work and community through three key dimensions: fit, links, and sacrifice. These dimensions have been shown to predict employees' intention to stay and voluntary turnover beyond traditional attitudinal variables.

The fit dimension refers to the compatibility between an employee's values, career aspirations, skills, and the organizational and community environment. Employees are more likely to remain in an organization when they perceive that their work environment and living conditions align with their personal and professional expectations. Links represent the formal and informal relationships employees establish with colleagues, supervisors, and the surrounding community. Strong interpersonal and organizational connections strengthen employees' attachment to their workplace. Sacrifice refers to the perceived material, professional, and psychological benefits that employees would forfeit if they left their current employment, including career opportunities, supportive relationships, housing, and community attachment. Employees who perceive greater sacrifices associated with leaving are less likely to seek alternative employment.

Job Embeddedness Theory provides a suitable lens for understanding teacher retention in rural secondary schools in Chongwe District. The motivational factors explored in this study - including working conditions, salaries and incentives, housing and social services, administrative support, and professional development opportunities - directly influence teachers' perceptions of fit, strengthen or weaken their organizational and community links, and determine the sacrifices associated with remaining in or leaving rural postings. Poor infrastructure, inadequate remuneration, limited career advancement opportunities, and weak administrative support reduce teachers' embeddedness, thereby increasing their likelihood of requesting transfers or leaving rural schools. Conversely, improvements in these motivational factors enhance teachers' attachment to their schools and communities, strengthening their commitment and long-term retention. The theory therefore provides a comprehensive framework for explaining how motivational factors shape teacher retention in rural secondary schools and offers a strong theoretical foundation for interpreting the findings of this study.

2.2 Empirical Review

Teacher retention remains one of the most widely researched issues in educational management because of its significant influence on educational quality, learner achievement, institutional stability, and workforce sustainability. Although teacher shortages are a global concern, rural schools are disproportionately affected due to geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, poor social amenities, and limited opportunities for professional growth. Consequently, researchers have increasingly sought to understand the factors that influence teachers' decisions to remain in or leave rural schools.

Existing evidence consistently demonstrates that teacher retention is influenced by a combination of financial, organizational, professional, and socio-environmental factors rather than a single determinant. The following review synthesizes empirical evidence from developed countries, developing countries, and Zambia to establish the context for the present study.

Empirical Evidence from Developed Countries

Studies from developed countries indicate that teacher retention is largely influenced by supportive organizational environments, effective leadership, professional relationships, and community integration rather than financial incentives alone. Increasingly, researchers argue that understanding why teachers remain in rural schools provides more meaningful policy insights than focusing solely on teacher attrition.

Rhinesmith et al., (2023) found that teachers in rural schools were more likely to remain when school leaders fostered collaborative organizational cultures characterized by trust, mentoring, shared decision-making, and emotional support. Teachers valued administrators who recognized their contributions and encouraged teamwork, resulting in stronger commitment despite the challenges of rural teaching. Similarly, Ulferts (2016) reported that teacher retention in rural Illinois depended on the interaction of school, community, and personal factors. Supportive leadership, manageable workloads, collegial relationships, and positive community acceptance increased teachers' willingness to remain, whereas isolation and limited career opportunities encouraged them to seek employment elsewhere.

Seelig and McCabe (2021) shifted the focus from understanding why teachers leave to examining why they stay. Their findings revealed that teachers developed long-term commitment through meaningful relationships with students, professional collaboration, leadership opportunities, and strong community attachment. This perspective closely aligns with Job Embeddedness Theory, which proposes that employees remain in organizations when they experience organizational fit, meaningful interpersonal links, and perceive substantial sacrifices associated with leaving.

Leadership has also emerged as a critical determinant of teacher retention. Frahm and Cianca (2021) found that supportive leadership characterized by mentoring, recognition, open communication, and collaborative decision-making enhanced teacher satisfaction and organizational commitment in hard-to-staff rural schools. Likewise, Williams, Williamson, and Siebert (2022) reported that teacher retention in rural Australia depended on supportive school leadership, positive school culture, community engagement, and professional support. The authors emphasized that teacher retention should be viewed not only as an educational issue but also as a broader rural development challenge requiring collaboration among schools, communities, and policymakers.

Collectively, evidence from developed countries suggests that teacher retention extends beyond financial incentives and is significantly influenced by supportive leadership, collaborative organizational cultures, professional relationships, community integration, and opportunities for professional growth.

Empirical Evidence from Developing Countries

Empirical studies from developing countries similarly demonstrate that teacher retention is influenced by multiple organizational and socio-economic factors. However, unlike developed countries, these contexts are further constrained by inadequate infrastructure, poor living conditions, limited educational resources, and weak institutional support.

In China, Zhi et al. (2025) examined rural teacher retention using Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and found that both hygiene and motivational factors significantly influenced teachers' decisions to remain in rural schools. Poor salaries, inadequate welfare benefits, limited promotion opportunities, poor housing, and weak interpersonal relationships reduced job satisfaction and increased turnover intentions. Conversely, supportive leadership, professional development opportunities, recognition, and improved welfare strengthened teacher commitment. The authors concluded that sustainable retention requires governments to improve organizational environments in addition to financial incentives.

Comparable findings have been reported in Ghana. Opoku et al. (2020) found that teacher retention was influenced by structural capital, including adequate infrastructure, accommodation, teaching resources, and institutional support, as well as social capital reflected through positive relationships with colleagues, school leaders, learners, and surrounding communities. Teachers who felt socially integrated within their schools demonstrated stronger organizational commitment and greater willingness to remain in rural schools. Similarly, Yeboah and Adom (2016) established that although financial incentives positively influenced teacher retention, they were insufficient in isolation. Teachers emphasized the importance of improved accommodation, transportation, healthcare services, professional recognition, and transparent promotion systems as essential components of long-term retention strategies.

Evidence from Nigeria further reinforces the multidimensional nature of teacher retention. Abioye, (2021) found that inadequate remuneration, poor infrastructure, insecurity, limited professional development, and weak administrative support contributed significantly to teacher turnover intentions. Nevertheless, intrinsic motivators such as community appreciation, supportive interpersonal relationships, and commitment to learners encouraged some teachers to remain despite difficult working conditions. The study recommended integrated retention strategies combining improved welfare packages, supportive leadership, professional development, and community participation.

Across developing countries, supportive school leadership consistently emerges as an important predictor of teacher retention. Teachers are more likely to remain where school leaders demonstrate effective communication, participatory decision-making, recognition, mentoring, and equitable workload allocation. Likewise, access to professional development opportunities, career advancement, and continuous training enhances job satisfaction and organizational commitment, whereas limited opportunities often encourage teachers to transfer to urban schools.

Overall, evidence from developing countries indicates that teacher retention is influenced by the interaction of salaries and incentives, working conditions, housing, administrative support, professional development, and the quality of interpersonal relationships within schools and communities. These findings provide important insights but also highlight the need for country-specific evidence due to differences in educational systems and policy environments.

Empirical Evidence from Zambia

In Zambia, teacher retention remains a persistent challenge, particularly in rural schools where teacher transfers and attrition continue to undermine educational quality. Existing studies consistently identify poor working conditions, inadequate accommodation, limited access to social amenities, weak administrative support, and constrained professional development opportunities as major contributors to teacher mobility.

Phiri and Mulenga (2020), studying teacher transfers in Chama District, found that inadequate housing, poor road infrastructure, unreliable electricity and water supply, limited healthcare services, and family separation were major reasons why teachers sought transfers to urban areas. Frequent transfers disrupted curriculum implementation, increased teacher workload, and negatively affected learner performance. The authors recommended improved accommodation, rural infrastructure, and enhanced welfare packages as sustainable teacher retention strategies.

Similarly, Sichilima and Chipindi (2020) investigated teacher transfers in Isoka District and established that transfer decisions were influenced by poor

working conditions, inadequate accommodation, weak administrative relationships, professional isolation, and limited access to essential social services. Urban schools attracted teachers because they offered better living conditions, stronger professional networks, and greater access to educational and social amenities. The study concluded that teacher deployment policies should better address teachers' workplace experiences and personal circumstances to improve retention.

Within Lusaka Province, Kukano and Mafora (2020) examined teacher attrition in public secondary schools across Chongwe, Lusaka, and Kafue districts. They found that teacher attrition contributed to staffing shortages, increased workloads, declining learner performance, and weakened school effectiveness. Teachers identified inadequate recognition, poor communication, limited participation in decision-making, and insufficient professional development opportunities as factors reducing organizational commitment. The study recommended participatory leadership, mentorship, and continuous professional development to improve teacher motivation and retention. Given that the study includes Chongwe District, it provides particularly relevant contextual evidence for the present research.

Collectively, Zambian studies consistently demonstrate that poor housing, inadequate infrastructure, limited teaching resources, weak communication, and insufficient administrative support reduce teachers' quality of life and encourage transfers to urban schools. Although rural hardship allowances offer some financial compensation, they often fail to offset the broader disadvantages associated with rural postings.

Synthesis of Literature and Research Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates broad consensus that teacher retention is influenced by a combination of salaries and incentives, working conditions, housing and social amenities, administrative support, professional development opportunities, and positive organizational relationships. Studies from developed countries emphasize organizational culture, leadership, and community embeddedness, while evidence from developing countries and Zambia highlights the additional influence of inadequate infrastructure, poor living conditions, and limited institutional support.

Despite these contributions, important gaps remain. Much of the Zambian literature focuses primarily on teacher transfers and attrition rather than examining teacher retention from a motivational perspective. Existing studies also tend to investigate individual factors in isolation, with limited attention given to the combined influence of multiple motivational dimensions. Furthermore, although Chongwe District has featured in broader studies on teacher attrition, limited empirical evidence specifically examines how working conditions, salaries and incentives, housing and social services, administrative support, and professional development collectively influence teacher retention in rural secondary schools.

The present study addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive examination of the motivational factors influencing teacher retention in selected rural secondary schools in Chongwe District. Guided by Job Embeddedness Theory, the study contributes context-specific evidence that can inform educational policies and interventions aimed at strengthening teacher motivation, improving workforce stability, and enhancing the quality of education in rural Zambia.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design to examine the motivational factors influencing teacher retention in selected rural secondary schools in Chongwe District, Zambia. A qualitative design is appropriate for exploring participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of complex social phenomena, particularly where contextual understanding is required (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mundia et al., 2023). The exploratory approach enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the motivational challenges and experiences of teachers working in rural schools (Mufalali et al., 2026; Munachande et al., 2026). Through qualitative inquiry, the study generated rich, context-specific insights into how working conditions, salaries and incentives, housing, administrative support, and professional development influence teacher retention, thereby providing evidence to inform educational policy and practice.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Chongwe District of Lusaka Province, Zambia. The district comprises predominantly rural communities where schools face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, poor road networks, limited access to healthcare, insufficient staff accommodation, and shortages of teaching and learning resources. These conditions make teacher recruitment and retention particularly difficult. The study specifically focused on Katoba Secondary School, Kampekete Secondary School, and Mukamambo II Secondary School, which were purposively selected because they experience many of the challenges associated with rural teacher deployment. These schools therefore provided an appropriate setting for investigating the motivational factors affecting teacher retention.

3.3 Target Population and Sampling

The target population comprised teachers and school administrators from the three selected rural secondary schools in Chongwe District. Teachers were included because they have firsthand experience of the motivational challenges associated with rural teaching, while school administrators provided insights into teacher welfare and retention practices. The study employed purposive sampling to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019; Mwiya et al., 2025). The sample size was determined through the principle of data saturation, where data collection continued until no new themes emerged (Guest et al., 2020; Mwiya, 2012; Chawala et al., 2022). This approach ensured the collection of rich and relevant qualitative data to address the study objectives.

3.4 Data Collection Methods and Instrument

Data were collected using semi-structured face-to-face interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Semi-structured interviews provided participants with the flexibility to express their experiences freely while enabling the researcher to probe for clarification and further detail where necessary (Saunders et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mufalali et al., 2026; Mwiya, 2006). Focus group discussions complemented the interviews by facilitating interaction among teachers and generating shared reflections on common experiences relating to teacher motivation and retention. The interview guide consisted

of two sections. The first collected demographic and professional information, while the second explored participants' experiences regarding working conditions, salaries and incentives, housing and social services, administrative support, professional development opportunities, and teacher retention. All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with participants' informed consent, audio-recorded with permission, and supplemented by field notes to ensure accurate and comprehensive documentation of participants' responses.

3.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the quality and rigor of the findings, the study applied the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through the use of multiple data collection methods, prolonged engagement with participants, and member checking to verify the accuracy of participants' responses. Transferability was achieved by providing detailed descriptions of the study setting, participants, and research procedures to facilitate comparison with similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mundia et al., 2025; Simasiku et al., 2026). Dependability was ensured through the consistent application of interview guides and the maintenance of an audit trail documenting the research process. Confirmability was strengthened by maintaining detailed records of data collection and analysis procedures and supporting the findings with verbatim quotations from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mufalali et al., 2026; Kaela, 2026).

3.6 Data Analysis Procedures

The study employed inductive thematic analysis following the six-step framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Audio-recorded interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim before the researcher repeatedly reviewed the transcripts to gain familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated from significant statements relating to teacher motivation and retention, after which similar codes were grouped into categories and refined into broader themes. The major themes identified included working conditions, salaries and incentives, housing and social services, administrative support, professional development opportunities, and teacher retention. These themes were interpreted in relation to the study objectives, existing literature, and Job Embeddedness Theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of how motivational factors influence teacher retention in rural secondary schools. Verbatim quotations were incorporated into the findings to strengthen the credibility of the analysis and ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' lived experiences.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant educational authorities and the management of the participating secondary schools before the commencement of the study. The study adhered to accepted ethical principles governing educational research (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Mundia et al., 2026). Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose, procedures, and significance of the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. All interview recordings, transcripts, and field notes were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes, with access restricted to the researcher. These measures ensured compliance with established ethical standards and safeguarded the rights and welfare of all participants.

4 Findings and Discussion

This section presents the study findings. Literature and related studies assisted in the discussion of the findings. The section begins with demographics and then moves into the analysis of data.

4.1 Profile of Study Participants

This section provided a detailed analysis of the demographics of the participants.

Table 1: Profile of Study Participants

Characteristics	Category	Number of Participants
Participant Category	Teachers	14
	School Administrators (Head Teachers/Deputy Head Teachers)	3
	Total	17
Gender	Male	10
	Female	7
	Total	17
Highest Professional Qualification	Diploma	5
	Bachelor's Degree	10
	Master's Degree	2
	Total	17
Teaching Experience	Less than 5 years	4
	5–10 years	7
	More than 10 years	6
	Total	17
School	Katoba Secondary School	6
	Kampekete Secondary School	5
	Mukamambo II Secondary School	6
	Total	17

Table 1 shows that the study participants comprised 14 teachers and 3 school administrators, with 10 males and 7 females. Most participants held Bachelor's Degrees (10), followed by Diplomas (5) and Master's Degrees (2). The majority had 5–10 years (7) or more than 10 years (6) of teaching experience. Participants were drawn from three secondary schools. This diverse participant profile enhanced the credibility of the findings by providing varied perspectives on the motivational factors influencing teacher retention in rural secondary schools.

4.2 Status of Teacher Retention in Rural Secondary Schools

The first objective examined the status of teacher retention in selected rural secondary schools in Chongwe District. The findings revealed that teacher retention remains low and unstable across Katoba, Kampekete, and Mukamambo II secondary schools, with most teachers viewing rural postings as temporary rather than long-term appointments. Frequent staff transfers and high turnover were reported as common occurrences that disrupt teaching continuity, increase workloads, and negatively affect school effectiveness. One participant remarked, “Most of us are just waiting for transfer. Nobody plans to stay in rural schools forever” (Participant 1). An administrator similarly observed, “Teachers come and go quickly. Every year we lose some staff to urban schools” (Participant 2), while another teacher added, “It is rare to find teachers who stay more than a few years here. The turnover is very high” (Participant 3). These verbatim responses demonstrate that teachers' decisions to leave rural schools reflect broader dissatisfaction with their working and living conditions.

The findings are effectively explained by Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001), which suggests that retention depends on employees' fit, links, and sacrifice. Teachers reported weak organisational fit due to inadequate infrastructure, limited social amenities, and constrained career opportunities. Their temporary perception of rural postings weakened social and professional links with schools and communities, while better living and professional opportunities in urban areas reduced the perceived sacrifice of leaving.

The findings are consistent with studies from developed countries, where Ingersoll (2001), Seelig and McCabe (2021), and Ulferts (2016) found that supportive working environments and community attachment enhance teacher retention. Similar evidence from developing countries, including Zhi et al. (2025) and Opoku et al. (2020), emphasises the importance of welfare, infrastructure, and organisational support. Within Zambia, the findings corroborate those of Phiri and Mulenga (2020), Sichilima and Chipindi (2020), and Kukano and Mafora (2020), confirming that poor accommodation, inadequate infrastructure, weak administrative support, and limited social amenities continue to undermine teacher retention in rural secondary schools.

4.3 Motivational Factors Influencing Teacher Retention (Objective 2)

The second objective sought to explore the motivational factors influencing teacher retention in selected rural secondary schools in Chongwe District. The findings reveal that teacher retention is influenced by the combined effects of working conditions, salaries and incentives, housing and social services, administrative support, and professional development opportunities. Rather than acting independently, these factors collectively shape teachers' decisions to remain in or leave rural schools. In line with Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001), these motivational factors influence teachers' organisational fit, strengthen or weaken their links with the school and community, and determine the perceived sacrifices associated with remaining in rural postings.

Working Conditions

The findings identified poor working conditions as one of the strongest factors undermining teacher motivation and retention. Participants highlighted inadequate teaching and learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, poor infrastructure, and unreliable electricity as barriers to effective teaching. One participant explained, “We sometimes teach without enough teaching materials like books and chalk” (Participant 1). Similarly, another observed, “The classrooms are overcrowded and some are in poor condition. It is not comfortable for both teachers and learners” (Participant 2), while another remarked, “There is no electricity in some parts of the school, which makes preparation and marking very difficult” (Participant 3).

These findings suggest that poor working environments reduce teachers' professional satisfaction and weaken their organisational attachment. From the perspective of Job Embeddedness Theory, inadequate working conditions reduce teachers' fit with the organisation because they are unable to perform their duties effectively. The findings corroborate those of Fullan (2007), Barrett et al. (2019), Ulferts (2016), and Phiri and Mulenga (2020), who concluded that supportive working environments and adequate infrastructure are fundamental to teacher motivation and long-term retention.

Salaries and Incentives

The study further established that salaries and financial incentives significantly influence teachers' willingness to remain in rural schools. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with inadequate salaries and delayed payment of hardship allowances. One teacher stated, “The salary is too small compared to the work we do in rural areas. Sometimes it feels like we are just surviving” (Participant 1). Another added, “Sometimes we wait months before receiving allowances, and this makes life very difficult” (Participant 2).

These findings indicate that inadequate financial rewards reduce morale and make rural postings less attractive. Within Job Embeddedness Theory, salaries and incentives increase the perceived sacrifice associated with leaving; however, where remuneration is inadequate, teachers perceive little to lose by transferring elsewhere. The findings support Bennell and Akyeampong (2007), Zhi et al. (2025), Yeboah and Adom (2016), and Phiri and Mulenga (2020), who argue that financial incentives improve retention only when complemented by broader improvements in teachers' welfare and working conditions.

Housing and Social Services

Housing and access to essential social services also emerged as important determinants of teacher retention. Participants described poor accommodation, inadequate healthcare services, and limited access to basic amenities as major challenges affecting their quality of life. One participant explained, “Some of us live in very poor houses and it is not comfortable at all. Sometimes you feel like leaving because of the conditions” (Participant 1). Another stated, “We travel long distances to get basic services like clinics, and it is very tiring” (Participant 2).

These findings demonstrate that teachers evaluate rural postings based on both workplace and living conditions. According to Job Embeddedness Theory, adequate housing strengthens teachers' fit with the community, while access to social services enhances their links and increases the sacrifice

associated with leaving. The findings are consistent with Opoku et al. (2020), Yeboah and Adom (2016), Phiri and Mulenga (2020), Sichilima and Chipindi (2020), and UNESCO (2020), who emphasised that decent accommodation and social amenities are essential for retaining teachers in rural schools.

Administrative Support

The findings further revealed that administrative support plays a significant role in motivating teachers to remain in rural schools. Participants emphasised the importance of recognition, participatory leadership, effective communication, and supportive supervision. One participant observed, “Sometimes we are not appreciated for the work we do. It feels like our efforts are not noticed” (Participant 1). Conversely, another remarked, “The head teacher is supportive, and that encourages us to work harder and stay committed” (Participant 2).

These findings suggest that supportive leadership strengthens teachers' organisational commitment and emotional attachment to their schools. Within Job Embeddedness Theory, positive leadership enhances teachers' fit and strengthens interpersonal links, thereby increasing organisational embeddedness. Similar findings were reported by Rhinesmith et al., (2023), Frahm and Cianca (2021), Williams et al. (2022), and Kukano and Mafora (2020), who identified supportive school leadership as a critical predictor of teacher retention.

Professional Development Opportunities

Limited professional development opportunities were also identified as a factor reducing teacher motivation and retention. Participants reported inadequate access to workshops, in-service training, and promotion opportunities. One participant explained, “We rarely attend workshops or training programs. Most of the time, we just continue teaching without upgrading our skills” (Participant 1). Another added, “There are few chances for promotion here, so many teachers feel stuck” (Participant 3).

These findings indicate that opportunities for career growth enhance teachers' commitment by improving job satisfaction and future career prospects. According to Job Embeddedness Theory, professional development strengthens organisational fit while increasing the perceived sacrifice associated with leaving because teachers risk forfeiting future learning and promotion opportunities. These findings support OECD (2018), Zhi et al. (2025), and Kukano and Mafora (2020), who found that continuous professional development is essential for improving teacher motivation and reducing attrition.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that teacher retention is shaped by the interaction of workplace, financial, organisational, and community-related factors. Improving these motivational dimensions collectively is critical for strengthening teachers' organisational embeddedness and promoting sustainable retention in rural secondary schools.

4.4 Relationship Between Motivation and Teacher Retention

The third objective examined the relationship between teacher motivation and teacher retention in selected rural secondary schools in Chongwe District. The findings revealed a strong positive relationship between teacher motivation and teachers' intentions to remain in or leave rural schools. Participants indicated that their commitment depended largely on the extent to which their professional, financial, and social needs were met. One participant stated, “Motivation is what makes a teacher stay or leave. Without it, people go elsewhere” (Participant 3). Similarly, another observed, “When teachers are not motivated, they start looking for transfers almost immediately” (Participant 2). These verbatim responses demonstrate that motivation is a critical determinant of teacher retention, with dissatisfaction across multiple aspects of the work environment increasing intentions to transfer.

The findings are effectively explained by Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001), which argues that retention is determined by employees' organisational fit, links, and sacrifice. Improved working conditions, supportive leadership, adequate remuneration, housing, and professional development strengthened teachers' fit with their schools, enhanced their professional and community links, and increased the perceived sacrifices associated with leaving. Conversely, inadequate motivation weakened these dimensions, making teachers more willing to transfer to urban schools.

The findings are consistent with evidence from developed countries. Seelig and McCabe (2021), Rhinesmith et al., (2023), and Williams et al. (2022) found that supportive leadership, meaningful professional relationships, and positive school cultures strengthen teacher commitment and retention. Similar evidence from developing countries, including Zhi et al. (2025), Opoku et al. (2020), and Abioye (2021), demonstrates that teacher retention depends on a combination of financial, organisational, and welfare-related factors rather than a single incentive. Within Zambia, the findings corroborate those of Phiri and Mulenga (2020), Sichilima and Chipindi (2020), and Kukano and Mafora (2020), confirming that poor infrastructure, inadequate accommodation, weak leadership, and limited professional development undermine teacher motivation and retention. Overall, the findings establish that improving teacher retention requires integrated motivational strategies that strengthen teachers' organisational embeddedness through enhanced working conditions, leadership, welfare, and career development.

4.5 Strategies for Improving Teacher Retention

The fourth objective sought to identify strategies for improving teacher motivation and strengthening teacher retention in selected rural secondary schools in Chongwe District. Participants proposed integrated strategies focusing on improved financial incentives, working conditions, housing and social services, administrative support, and professional development. They emphasised that sustainable teacher retention requires addressing teachers' professional, economic, and social needs simultaneously rather than through isolated interventions.

Participants recommended improving salaries and ensuring timely payment of rural hardship allowances. One participant stated, “Government should improve salaries and allowances so that teachers feel valued and appreciated for the work they do in rural schools” (Participant 1). Another observed, “If allowances were paid on time and salaries improved, many teachers would think twice before asking for transfers” (Participant 2). They further stressed the importance of decent accommodation and improved social amenities. As one participant explained, “Teachers need proper houses in rural areas because accommodation is a big problem. Good housing would encourage many of us to stay” (Participant 2), while another added, “Improving roads, clinics and other services around schools would make life much easier for teachers and their families” (Participant 3). Participants also advocated for improved teaching resources, supportive leadership, and expanded professional development opportunities. One teacher remarked, “Teachers should be given equal opportunities to attend workshops and training because learning new skills motivates us and makes us feel valued” (Participant 1).

These findings align with Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001), which posits that improved remuneration, housing, working conditions, supportive leadership, and career development strengthen teachers' organisational fit, links, and sacrifice, thereby enhancing retention. The findings are

consistent with studies by Williams et al. (2022) and Frahm and Cianca (2021) in developed countries, Zhi et al. (2025), Yeboah and Adom (2016), and Abioye (2021) in developing countries, and Phiri and Mulenga (2020), Sichilima and Chipindi (2020), and Kukano and Mafora (2020) in Zambia. Overall, the findings demonstrate that sustainable teacher retention requires integrated policy interventions combining financial, organisational, professional, and community-based support to strengthen teacher motivation and long-term commitment to rural schools.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the motivational factors influencing teacher retention in rural secondary schools in Chongwe District, Zambia. The findings established that teacher retention remains low and is primarily influenced by the interaction of working conditions, salaries and incentives, housing and social services, administrative support, and professional development opportunities. Guided by Job Embeddedness Theory, the study demonstrated that these factors collectively shape teachers' organisational fit, interpersonal links, and perceived sacrifices associated with remaining in rural schools. The findings further confirmed a strong positive relationship between teacher motivation and retention, indicating that improvements in a single motivational factor are insufficient to sustain long-term retention. Consequently, enhancing teacher retention requires integrated interventions that simultaneously address teachers' professional, financial, organisational, and social needs to strengthen workforce stability and improve educational outcomes in rural secondary schools.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that the Ministry of Education strengthen teacher retention policies by implementing comprehensive motivational packages that combine competitive salaries, timely payment of rural hardship allowances, improved housing, and better access to healthcare and other essential social services. The government should prioritise investment in school infrastructure, teaching and learning resources, and reliable utilities to create conducive working environments in rural schools.

School administrators should adopt participatory leadership practices characterised by effective communication, recognition, mentorship, and supportive supervision to foster teachers' organisational commitment and job satisfaction. Furthermore, equal access to continuous professional development, in-service training, promotion opportunities, and career progression should be provided to teachers serving in rural schools to enhance their professional growth and motivation.

Finally, policymakers should adopt an integrated teacher retention framework grounded in Job Embeddedness Theory that simultaneously strengthens teachers' organisational fit, professional and community links, and perceived benefits of remaining in rural schools, thereby promoting sustainable teacher retention and improving the quality of education in rural Zambia.

Declaration of Competing Interests

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Ethical considerations

The article followed all ethical standards appropriate for this kind of research.

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