

Empowerment-Based Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD): The Role of Strategic Leadership in Advancing Teacher Professionalism

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of strategic leadership in implementing Empowerment-Based Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD) to advance teacher professionalism in three public junior high schools: SMPN 1 Marabahan, SMPN 3 Marabahan, and SMPN 4 Alalak. As professional learning increasingly requires sustained, context-responsive approaches, understanding how school leaders design and enact empowerment strategies becomes essential for strengthening teacher growth. Employing a qualitative multi-case study design, data were collected through (1) semi-structured interviews with principals (P1, P2, P3) and teachers (T1–T12), (2) observations of leadership practices, mentoring processes, and collaborative learning forums, and (3) document analysis of school planning, supervision reports, and teacher development records. Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, with credibility ensured through triangulation, member checking, and audit trails. The findings indicate that strategic leadership plays a decisive role in shaping empowerment practices that directly support E-CPD. At SMPN 1 Marabahan, the principal employs strategic shared decision-making and distributed leadership to empower teachers in curriculum design, school program development, and collaborative problem-solving. At SMPN 3 Marabahan, empowerment manifests through structured mentoring, reflective dialogues, and pedagogical autonomy, enabling teachers to innovate and conduct classroom-based inquiries. Meanwhile, SMPN 4 Alalak integrates empowerment into capacity-building initiatives such as communities of practice, peer coaching, and classroom action research cycles. Cross-case analysis reveals that empowerment-based strategic leadership strengthens teacher motivation, enhances engagement in professional learning, and fosters a culture of continuous improvement. Overall, the study concludes that strategic leadership-grounded E-CPD is essential for cultivating sustainable teacher professionalism within Indonesian school contexts.

Keywords: Empowerment-Based Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD); Strategic Leadership; Teacher Empowerment; Teacher Professionalism; Distributed Leadership; Qualitative Multi-Case Study.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher professionalism has become a critical determinant of educational quality and student achievement in Indonesia. Teachers are expected not only to possess deep subject knowledge but also to demonstrate strong character, effective communication, collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving skills (Jiang et al., 2019). In addition, competencies such as literacy in reading, writing, numeracy, scientific knowledge, and ICT, as well as cultural awareness and critical thinking, are increasingly essential for meeting both national and global educational standards (Amelia et al., 2023). The development of such comprehensive competencies begins with structured

teacher professional development that is continuous, reflective, and contextually relevant. Without sustained efforts to enhance teacher skills and professional identity, schools struggle to deliver meaningful learning experiences and prepare students to succeed in an increasingly complex world. Therefore, focusing on teacher empowerment and continuous professional development is vital to ensure that educators can fulfill their roles as facilitators of knowledge, mentors, and role models (Ahrari et al., 2021; Suriansyah, 2018).

The quality of education in Indonesia is closely linked to teachers' professionalism, work habits, and the organizational culture of schools. Empirical studies in Barito Kuala Regency reveal that school culture and principal supervision account for approximately 27% and 10.2% of the variance in elementary teacher professionalism, highlighting the influence of leadership and school environment on teacher performance (Mujiati et al., 2019). Strong teacher professionalism ensures effective instructional delivery, classroom management, and student engagement, contributing to institutional excellence. Conversely, gaps in teacher competence and motivation can undermine curriculum implementation and limit student learning outcomes. Therefore, professional development initiatives must focus not only on skills acquisition but also on cultivating a supportive school culture that encourages continuous improvement (Dagnew Kelkay, 2020; Nooruddin & Bhamani, 2019). By embedding professionalism into everyday practice, teachers can become catalysts for sustained educational development.

Globally, the teaching workforce faces considerable challenges in terms of scale, quality, and equitable distribution. In 2019, approximately 93.7 million teachers were reported worldwide, with 32.6 million in primary education and 20.7 million in lower secondary education (Faizuddin et al., 2022). UNESCO projects a need for 44 million new teachers by 2030 to achieve universal access to quality education, emphasizing the urgency of addressing teacher shortages and strengthening professional capacity (Murry et al., 2023). This global context underscores the strategic importance of professional development as a mechanism to enhance teacher quality and learning outcomes. Countries that invest in teacher empowerment and continuous development are more likely to achieve sustainable improvements in educational performance (Ali et al., 2025). Thus, Indonesia's focus on teacher professional growth aligns with a broader international agenda of educational quality and equity.

Within Indonesia, research demonstrates the importance of sustained professional development programs for teachers. While many teachers acknowledge the benefits of training for knowledge enhancement and instructional skills, structural challenges such as limited follow-up, scheduling conflicts, and insufficient institutional support often reduce the effectiveness of these programs. The teacher professional development market is growing, valued globally at approximately USD 5.9–6.8 billion, reflecting increased demand for upskilling and lifelong learning (Ali et al., 2025; Jeyakumar et al., 2024). However, financial investment alone does not guarantee improved outcomes; the content, delivery, and contextual relevance of training are equally critical. Effective professional development must integrate teacher empowerment, reflection, and collaboration to transform learning practices. Therefore, continuous and context-sensitive CPD becomes essential for building teacher competence and confidence (Kitto et al., 2018).

Despite these efforts, disparities in education quality persist, particularly in junior high schools in remote regions. In Barito Kuala Regency, only 17.86% of the population had completed junior high school by the end of 2024, while just 3.98% had achieved higher education, signaling limited human capital development. These statistics reflect broader challenges in equipping students with the skills needed for regional and global competitiveness. Schools in such contexts face additional pressures to ensure teachers are capable, motivated, and professionally competent. Teacher empowerment and continuous professional development provide a pathway to overcome these challenges by enhancing the skills and autonomy of educators (Kjaer et al., 2017; Sargeant et al., 2018). Ensuring that professional growth is embedded in school culture helps create sustainable improvements in teaching and learning outcomes (Hidayah et al., 2020; Indriani et al., 2022).

At the school level, the efficacy of CPD is strongly tied to the concept of teacher empowerment. Empowerment encourages teachers to take ownership of their professional growth, engage in reflective practice, collaborate with colleagues, and implement innovative teaching strategies. Systematic reviews indicate that empowerment-based CPD positively influences classroom management, instructional effectiveness, and student engagement (Ali et al., 2025). However, many programs remain episodic and fail to foster lasting cultural or pedagogical change. Embedding empowerment within professional development allows teachers to become active agents of change rather than passive recipients of training. This approach helps cultivate a school-wide culture of continuous learning, benefiting both educators and students (Kitto et al., 2018; Kjaer et al., 2017; Lockyer et al., 2017).

Addressing challenges in teacher professionalism requires a professional development model that is not only continuous and context-sensitive but also strategically led by school principals. The Empowerment-Based Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD) model is designed to respond to these needs by integrating reflective cycles, collaborative inquiry, teacher agency, and alignment with school leadership's strategic direction. Unlike conventional workshop-based training, E-CPD emphasizes sustained engagement, empowerment, and evidence-driven improvement—ensuring that professional growth translates directly into meaningful instructional

impact. Under strategic leadership, teachers are positioned as active agents in shaping their learning trajectories, fostering both individual growth and organizational capacity. Through structured mentoring, knowledge sharing, and reflective dialogue, E-CPD strengthens the professional learning culture and encourages continuous innovation across school settings.

In public junior high schools—particularly in geographically remote areas such as Barito Kuala—the role of strategic leadership becomes even more critical to the success of E-CPD. This study examines how empowerment-oriented leadership practices support the implementation of E-CPD in a multi-case analysis across SMPN 1, SMPN 3, and SMPN 4 Marabahan. By comparing these three sites, the research highlights variations in leadership strategies that facilitate teacher growth. Empirical evidence shows that principal supervision and school work culture jointly contribute 42.9% to teacher professionalism (Noorhapizah et al., 2023), underscoring the importance of leadership that combines empowerment, accountability, and a positive school climate. Thus, strategic leadership serves as the foundation that enables E-CPD to function as a structured, measurable, and adaptive professional development framework.

Beyond enhancing teacher skills, the E-CPD model—when guided by strategic leadership—addresses broader concerns related to educational quality and equity. Embedding empowerment into ongoing professional development encourages teachers to reflect, innovate, and collaborate in addressing diverse student needs. Continuous assessment and feedback mechanisms ensure that professional growth remains aligned with institutional goals and quality assurance standards. Moreover, the model nurtures a culture of shared responsibility, where principals and teachers work collectively to elevate instructional quality and strengthen school performance. In this way, E-CPD embodies a holistic, contextually relevant, and leadership-driven approach to teacher professionalism, with long-term benefits for both teachers and students.

Research Questions

1. How do school principals exercise strategic leadership in implementing empowerment-based strategies to support Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD) in SMPN 1, SMPN 3, and SMPN 4 Marabahan?
2. In what ways do empowerment-oriented leadership practices contribute to enhancing teacher professionalism within the three school contexts?
3. How can a strategically led Empowerment-Based Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD) model be designed and contextualized to effectively strengthen teacher professionalism in public junior high schools?

METHOD

Research Design

This study on the professional development of teachers in public junior high schools (SMPN) in Barito Kuala Regency adopts a **descriptive-qualitative research method**. The approach focuses on observing, describing, analyzing, and portraying phenomena related to teacher professionalism in natural school settings (Silverman, 2016). Specifically, the research explores the behaviors and roles of school principals in fostering teacher professionalism, including leadership strategies, empowerment initiatives, and quality assurance practices at SMPN 1, SMPN 3, and SMPN 4 Marabahan. The primary objective is to capture factual evidence of how professional development is implemented in schools, providing insights that are scientifically grounded and useful for designing an effective model that contributes significantly to stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, and policymakers.

The qualitative approach employed in this study aligns with the perspectives of Bogdan and Taylor, emphasizing that research produces descriptive data in the form of words, observations, and narratives rather than numerical measurement. By using this approach, the study aims to uncover actual facts, social realities, perceptions, and behaviors of participants without being constrained or biased by pre-determined instruments or rigid measurement scales (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). This naturalistic methodology allows for in-depth examination of real-life processes in schools, capturing the complexity and nuances of teacher professionalism as it occurs in context. Through this lens, the study seeks to provide rich, idiographic descriptions that reveal underlying patterns and meanings, rather than merely quantifying phenomena.

Key Informants

The selection of key informants in this study is based on the research objectives, using a purposive and flexible approach through snowball sampling. Key informants include supervisors from the Barito Kuala Education Office, school principals, and teachers at SMPN 1, 3, and 4 Marabahan. The number and composition of informants are not fixed and may change during the research until the data collected is sufficient to answer the research questions.

The data collected covers perspectives, behaviors, and actual practices of professional development in teachers. The analysis focuses on the current situation, desired outcomes, underlying assumptions, and recommended strategies for professional development. Thus, the information obtained from key informants forms the basis for developing concepts, processes, and models for SMPN teachers' professional development.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three main techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation, which complement each other to provide a comprehensive overview.

1. Observation, was conducted directly on teacher and principal activities related to professional development, both in teaching and managerial tasks. Observations were systematic and recorded in field notes and photographs to ensure data accuracy. This also enables triangulation with interviews and documentation to increase research credibility. Observation is essential for capturing teacher behavior patterns in professional development naturally and factually.
2. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured guides and a flexible approach, allowing questions to adapt to the context and participants' responses. They focused on experiences, perceptions, and strategies applied by principals and teachers in professional development.
3. Documentation review complemented observations and interviews by verifying data related to teacher profiles, professional development programs, school activity records, and official documents. Documentation serves as triangulation to ensure consistency between informants' information and written evidence (Miles et al., 2014).

Integrating observation, interviews, and documentation provides rich, valid, and representative data. This approach enables the researcher to describe professional development processes in a naturalistic and systematic manner. The combination of techniques provides a strong foundation for in-depth and context-based data analysis.

Research Stages

The study followed three main stages: orientation, exploration, and member check, which are interconnected to ensure data quality.

1. The orientation stage aimed to gain an initial understanding of the research problem, prepare interview and observation guides, and establish communication with relevant parties at the Education Office and schools. Orientation enables the researcher to fully understand the research context before collecting data. This stage is crucial for focusing the study and minimizing bias. Proper orientation ensures that subsequent data collection is efficient and aligned with research objectives.
2. The exploration stage is the core phase of data collection through interviews, observations, and document review, according to the research focus. Collected data were condensed or summarized to facilitate the identification of themes, patterns, and meanings. The researcher actively triangulated the three data sources to ensure completeness and consistency. Reflection and preliminary analysis were conducted to adjust data collection strategies to real field conditions. This stage allowed the researcher to gain deep insights into the implementation of professional development in SMPN. The gathered data formed the basis for verification and further analysis.
3. The member check stage was conducted alongside exploration to validate and ensure the accuracy of collected data. Interview, observation, and documentation results were confirmed with informants for approval. If gaps or ambiguities were found, the researcher clarified them through follow-up interviews or discussions. Triangulation with other competent parties strengthened data validity. Member checking ensured that the researcher's interpretations aligned with informants' experiences and perspectives. Consequently, the data produced were reliable and accurately reflected field realities (Silverman, 2016).

Research Instruments

The research instruments included interview guides, observation sheets, and documentation guides, serving as tools to support data collection. Interview guides helped maintain focus and direction during interactions with informants, while observation sheets were used to systematically record teacher activities and behaviors (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Cameras and field notes documented teaching processes and managerial activities related to teacher professionalism. Documentation guides were used to collect and examine official documents, including teacher profiles, professional development programs, and school activity reports. The integration of these instruments allowed the researcher to obtain comprehensive and valid data. Clear instruments ensured that the research was conducted consistently, systematically, and under control.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical approach based on Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Analysis was conducted at two levels: single-site and cross-site, to identify patterns, relationships, and site-specific findings at SMPN 1, 3, and 4 Marabahan, as well as their integration. In single-site analysis, data from interviews, observations, and documentation were categorized, filtered, and organized to identify themes and patterns. Cross-site analysis compared findings across schools to develop provisional theoretical propositions applicable more broadly (Miles et al., 2014). Analysis was conducted inductively to extract meanings relevant to the context. This approach ensured the research produced rich, accurate, and evidence-based findings.

Data analysis also involved verification through triangulation and validation with informants to ensure interpretive accuracy. The researcher emphasized understanding the meanings behind the data, making the results not only descriptive but also reflective of social and educational contexts. The inductive approach allowed identification of previously unseen relationships and significant collective influences on teacher professionalism. Consequently, the findings provided a solid foundation for developing a contextually relevant Empowerment-Based Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD) model. This approach ensured the research results were both practically and theoretically meaningful.

Data Validity Testing

Data validity was ensured through four main aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

1. Credibility was achieved through extended observation, triangulation of sources, methods, and time, and member checks with informants to verify data accuracy.
2. Transferability refers to the applicability of research findings in other contexts, depending on the user.
3. Dependability was assessed through auditing by supervisors or independent parties to ensure consistent processes and results.
4. Confirmability ensured objectivity by verifying that the findings were based on research processes rather than researcher bias (Miles et al., 2014).

These combined procedures guaranteed that collected data were valid, reliable, and scientifically accountable.

The validation process was systematically applied from data collection to analysis and reporting. Triangulation compared data from multiple sources and methods to minimize bias. Member checking ensured that interpretations matched informants' perceptions, while negative case analysis identified conflicting or divergent data to strengthen validity. These steps aimed to produce qualitative research that was credible, applicable, consistent, and objective. Through this process, the research outcomes accurately reflected field realities and provided a solid basis for developing the E-CPD model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this multi-site case study reveal how strategic leadership, empowerment-oriented practices, and contextualized professional development models operate within three public junior high schools in Barito Kuala. Data collected from interviews, observations, and documents show that school principals in SMPN 1, SMPN 3, and SMPN 4 Marabahan employ varied yet interconnected leadership strategies that shape teacher professionalism and the implementation of Empowerment-Based Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD). While each school demonstrates distinct approaches rooted in its cultural identity, organizational dynamics, and leadership style, several overarching patterns emerge across the cases. These include the strengthening of shared values, the promotion of collaborative work environments, and the systematic involvement of teachers in decision-making processes related to professional learning. The results further indicate that empowerment-based practices significantly enhance teacher motivation, agency, and commitment to continuous improvement.

The following table presents a structured summary of the key research findings across the three study sites—SMPN 1 Marabahan, SMPN 3 Marabahan, and SMPN 4 Marabahan. This cross-case comparison highlights how each school implements strategic leadership practices to support Empowerment-Based Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD) and strengthen teacher professionalism within its unique organizational context. Although the three schools share similar cultural foundations rooted in local philosophical values, their leadership approaches differ in emphasis, mechanisms, and strategic implementation. These variations provide a rich understanding of how empowerment principles are operationalized at the school level through vision enactment, collaborative culture, and contextualized professional development practices. The table also integrates findings related to empowerment-oriented leadership behaviours and the design of a contextually relevant E-CPD model, offering a comprehensive view of how leadership, empowerment, and professional learning intersect. Overall, this

comparative presentation allows for clearer identification of cross-site patterns while recognizing the nuanced characteristics of each school's strategic leadership framework.

Table 1. Research Findings by School

Research Aspect	SMPN 1 Marabahan	SMPN 3 Marabahan	SMPN 4 Marabahan
Strategic Leadership in Implementing E-CPD	- Embeds local values (<i>baiman, bauntung, batuah</i>) into work culture and CPD activities. - Principal models the school vision, work discipline, and strong work ethic. - Encourages learning innovation through internal teacher forums. - Conducts teacher competency mapping and recognizes achievements. - Builds family-oriented communication to strengthen teacher motivation.	- Strengthens local philosophical values (<i>gawi sebumi, waja sampai kaputing</i>) as foundations for professionalism. - Practices collegial leadership through intersubject collaboration. - Principal consistently models professional and reflective behavior. - Involves teachers in planning school-based CPD programs. - Develops a positive, inclusive school climate.	- Integrates local values (<i>gawi sebumi, Dalas Hangit, Mun Manyarah Kada</i>) into learning and CPD routines. - Strengthens collective leadership through teamwork. - Provides space for innovation through lesson study and peer mentoring. - Implements fair and proportional task distribution. - Emphasizes the school vision through daily routines and modeling.
Empowerment-Oriented Leadership Practices	- Teachers are given autonomy to design learning innovations. - Decision-making conducted through participatory processes. - Senior teachers serve as mentors for juniors. - A supportive work climate is created through emotional and professional support.	- Encourages reflection and collaboration through internal MGMP/PLC activities. - Provides autonomy in designing teaching modules and assessments. - Strengthens mentoring and dialogic supervision. - Empowers teachers based on individual strengths and experience.	- Enhances professionalism through team-based innovation projects. - Opens routine discussion spaces for solving instructional challenges. - Builds a “safe-to-innovate” environment so teachers can try new approaches without fear of failure. - Strengthens religious values as intrinsic motivators.
Design and Contextualization of the E-CPD Model	- E-CPD contextualized through cycles of reflection, local lesson study, and reinforcement of school values. - CPD aligned with student learning challenges and school quality standards. - Integrates CPD with school quality assurance documents (annual plans, supervision reports, PKG).	- E-CPD oriented toward collaborative innovation based on local needs. - Continuous CPD through regular coaching sessions and evidence-based performance review. - School-based CPD anchored to the vision of “excellence, religious character, and strong values.”	- E-CPD connected with local philosophies to ensure contextual relevance. - CPD conducted through Professional Learning Community (PLC) cycles. - Links CPD with goals for improved student outcomes and strengthened school culture.
School Climate and Cultural Support for E-CPD	- Strong culture of togetherness and mutual help. - Weekly reflection routines institutionalized. - Teachers feel appreciated and included in decisions.	- Collaborative and supportive school climate. - Open communication prioritized between principal and teachers. - Innovation promoted as a shared school identity.	- Strong religious, disciplined, and innovative school culture. - Collaboration strengthened through regular PLC meetings. - Safe and comfortable environment for professional growth.

The cross-school analysis presented in the table highlights clear patterns in how strategic leadership is enacted to strengthen Empowerment-Based Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD) across the three junior high schools. Although each school embeds different local philosophical values such as *baiman–bauntung–batuah*, *gawi sebumi*, *waja sampai kaputing*, or *Dalas Hangit*, these values serve a similar strategic function: grounding teacher professionalism in culturally resonant norms that shape behavior, motivation, and identity. The principals of SMPN 1, SMPN 3, and SMPN 4 all model their school's vision and expected professional behavior, demonstrating a commitment to reflective and value-driven leadership. This modeling supports teacher agency, as teachers felt more confident to innovate when their principals demonstrated openness and trust. Across all sites, strategic leadership is also reflected through collaborative decision-making, proportional task distribution, and transparent communication. These shared approaches indicate that strategic, empowerment-oriented leadership provides a consistent foundation for integrating E-CPD into daily school operations.

Furthermore, the findings illustrate that empowerment-oriented leadership practices significantly shape each school's approach to designing and contextualizing the E-CPD model. SMPN 1 and SMPN 3 emphasize teacher autonomy, mentoring structures, and collegial collaboration, while SMPN 4 builds a strong “safe-to-innovate” culture to encourage risk-taking and creativity. All schools integrate cycles of reflection, lesson study or PLC activities, and evidence-based supervision to embed CPD into existing school routines. Importantly, empowerment is not conceptualized merely as granting freedom but as providing structured support aligned with competency mapping, school vision, and quality assurance standards. Teachers across the three sites experienced empowerment as both an opportunity and a responsibility, reflected in their increased ownership of program planning, instructional improvement, and professional growth. Together, these patterns demonstrate that a strategically led E-CPD model must be culturally grounded, collaboration-driven, and systematically aligned with school development priorities to effectively enhance teacher professionalism in the Indonesian junior high school context.

Strategic Leadership Practices in Implementing Empowerment-Based Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD)

School principals in SMPN 1, SMPN 3, and SMPN 4 Marabahan demonstrate strategic leadership through the cultivation of shared values that guide teacher empowerment and professional growth. Each school embeds local values—such as *baiman*, *bauntung*, and *batual*—not only in religious routines but also in shaping a work ethic that supports Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD). As stated by P1, *“Teachers must develop themselves based on the school’s core values; when these values are strong, professionalism naturally follows.”* Document reviews show that these values are explicitly integrated into school development plans and aligned with teacher performance indicators. By embedding these shared values into CPD activities, principals strategically strengthen empowerment-based professional development rooted in meaningful cultural and institutional norms.

Strategic leadership is further reflected in the principals’ efforts to articulate and model a clear school vision that drives empowerment-based CPD. All principals (P1, P2, P3) consistently communicate the school vision through meetings, supervision practices, and collaborative activities. This behavioural modelling inspires teachers to follow the same direction. As T4 from SMPN 3 explained, *“We see the principal always modelling good practices first, so we feel encouraged to learn and change as well.”* Leadership documents confirm that the school vision is closely linked to academic targets, school culture, and professional development strategies. Through visible modelling of expected behaviours—such as punctuality, initiative, and reflective practice—principals reinforce teachers’ agency within the E-CPD process.

Another dimension of strategic leadership is evident in the principals’ role as initiators of innovation and facilitators of collaborative inquiry. Principals frequently encourage teachers to experiment with new pedagogical strategies, develop innovative learning media, and share best practices across departments. P3 stated, *“I want teachers to feel safe when trying new ideas; innovation is part of continuous professional growth.”* Document analysis shows scheduled innovation workshops, lesson study cycles, and peer mentoring sessions that support ongoing learning. This environment of psychological safety and experimentation translates empowerment principles into daily professional practice, helping teachers perceive CPD as a shared opportunity rather than a mandatory task.

Principals also strengthen teacher empowerment by actively involving teachers in collaborative decision-making related to E-CPD planning, implementation, and evaluation. Teachers consistently reported that they participate in discussions about training topics, needs analysis, and follow-up improvement plans. As T7 from SMPN 1 stated, *“We are involved in deciding the training activities, so we feel a shared responsibility for the outcomes.”* Meeting minutes and school quality assurance documents indicate frequent joint planning sessions, collaborative monitoring, and reflective reviews following CPD activities. This participatory leadership approach ensures that professional development is relevant, contextual, and grounded in teachers’ lived experiences.

Strategic leadership is also reflected in the principals’ efforts to build a collaborative, productive, and innovation-oriented school culture that sustains E-CPD. Teachers across sites described their school environments as collegial and supportive of shared learning. T9 from SMPN 3 noted, *“Our school culture is very supportive; whenever there is a training session, we learn together.”* Document evidence shows that principals institutionalize collaborative routines—weekly reflection forums, instructional coaching, and shared lesson observations—that reinforce continuous improvement. Through these cultural mechanisms, principals create an ecosystem in which empowerment is embedded in daily interactions, not just in formal CPD agendas.

Principals demonstrate strategic leadership by ensuring open communication, sustained motivation, and efficient resource allocation to support empowerment-based CPD. Interviews show that principals maintain open communication through frequent informal dialogues, messaging groups, and scheduled check-ins, allowing teachers to share concerns and seek guidance. P2 emphasized, *“Communication must flow smoothly so teachers feel appreciated and willing to grow.”* Document analysis further reveals deliberate resource planning—including CPD budgets, digital tools, and scheduled mentoring time—to ensure effective implementation. Principals also motivate teachers through recognition during school assemblies, performance reviews, and professional forums. These efforts collectively enhance teacher confidence, maintain engagement in E-CPD, and align professional development initiatives with broader school improvement goals.

The findings of this study reveal that strategic leadership plays a central role in driving Empowerment-Based Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD) across the three schools. The principals’ ability to embed local values, articulate a clear vision, and model professional behaviours reflects the characteristics of strategic and transformational leadership identified in earlier studies. The effective leaders strengthen teacher learning by aligning school culture, professional expectations, and organizational goals (Arici & Uysal, 2022; Bakokonyane & Bakokonyane, 2022). This study reinforces that claim through evidence of principals who build coherence between shared values, CPD activities, and daily school routines. Furthermore, the participatory decision-making observed in all three schools supports Williams findings that teacher involvement in planning professional development enhances ownership and improves implementation quality (Williams, 2020). The emphasis on innovation, collaboration, and psychological safety also mirrors framework of “professional capital,” where trust, collective

learning, and teacher agency are foundational for sustainable professional growth (Andreev et al., 2020; Shonhe, 2020). Thus, these findings demonstrate that strategic leadership is not merely administrative but deeply pedagogical, shaping the cultural and structural conditions necessary for effective empowerment-based CPD.

The study also highlights that strategic leadership strengthens teacher professionalism through the deliberate cultivation of school culture, collaborative structures, and communication systems. The nurturing of supportive cultural norms—such as collegiality, collective responsibility, and shared reflection, who emphasize that distributed leadership fosters an environment where continuous learning becomes the norm (Dagnew Kelkay, 2020). Similarly, the principals' efforts to institutionalize mentoring, lesson study cycles, and reflective forums echo Kiral's assertion that professional learning must be ongoing, evidence-informed, and embedded in teachers' daily work (Kiral, 2020). The strategic use of recognition, motivation, and resource allocation identified in this study also parallels the work of Ferine, who highlight that effective school leaders sustain teacher engagement by ensuring that structures, incentives, and support mechanisms are aligned with professional development goals (Ferine et al., 2021). These findings collectively illustrate how empowerment-based CPD thrives when school leaders intentionally integrate cultural, structural, and interpersonal strategies. In doing so, strategic leadership becomes a catalyst that transforms CPD from isolated training events into a continuous, empowering, and contextually relevant process that advances teacher professionalism (Faizuddin et al., 2022; Lange et al., 2023; Peeters et al., 2018).

Contributions of Empowerment-Oriented Leadership to Enhancing Teacher Professionalism

Empowerment-oriented leadership across the three schools fostered teacher professionalism by distributing authority and encouraging participatory decision-making. In all sites, principals adopted an open-door communication culture that enabled teachers to voice concerns and propose program innovations. P1 emphasized, *"I want teachers to feel that this school is also theirs. When they create ideas, they must have the space to implement them."* Similarly, T2 noted that collaborative forums provided *"a sense of ownership that motivates us to work more professionally."* Document analysis (DocA) showed formal structures such as *Teacher Innovation Teams* and *Subject-Based Working Groups (MGMP)* designed to institutionalize shared leadership. These findings support Lee et al.'s conclusion that empowering leadership enhances teacher agency and professional responsibility (Lee et al., 2022).

Empowerment practices were also reflected in systematic professional learning opportunities initiated collaboratively rather than top-down. Teachers in all schools expressed that the principal encouraged them to determine their own CPD needs and goals. P3 stated, *"I only facilitate; teachers decide what competencies they want to develop."* Teachers validated this approach, with T1 explaining that CPD became *"more relevant because it comes from our actual challenges in the classroom."* Documents (DocB) showed annual CPD plans co-created between leadership teams and teachers, incorporating peer coaching, lesson study, and microteaching cycles. These practices resonate with Oyenuga, who argued that teacher-driven CPD enhances relevance, engagement, and sustained professional growth (Oyenuga et al., 2020).

A strong culture of recognition further contributed to advancing teacher professionalism in the three schools. Principals used both formal and informal mechanisms to acknowledge teacher initiative and progress. P2 described, *"Recognition is important. When teachers feel appreciated, they become more confident to lead small projects."* Teachers confirmed this, as T3 noted that appreciation *"motivates us to improve our teaching quality."* Document evidence (DocC) included certificates, newsletters, and monthly staff highlights that showcased teacher achievements. Recognition is a catalyst for strengthening teacher leadership and professionalism (Bakokonyane & Bakokonyane, 2022).

Empowerment-oriented leadership also promoted collaboration as a professional norm rather than a compliance requirement. All three principals emphasized team-based problem-solving to elevate instructional quality. P1 stated, *"No teacher works alone here; collaboration is part of our identity."* Teachers mirrored this sentiment, with T2 sharing that collaborative lesson planning *"helps us refine teaching strategies and feel professionally supported."* Document analysis (DocA) revealed structured collaboration time and cross-department mentoring programs. These findings are consistent with Patrick's concept of *collaborative professionalism*, where collective expertise drives higher instructional standards (Patrick, 2022).

Finally, empowerment-oriented leadership created a safe environment for reflection and innovation, ultimately strengthening teacher professionalism. Principals encouraged risk-taking and assured teachers that mistakes were part of learning. P3 emphasized, *"I never punish innovation that fails; I value the effort because it grows professionalism."* Teachers confirmed this direction, with T1 saying that psychological safety *"gives us courage to try new methods without fear of being judged."* Document evidence showed reflective logs, lesson study reports, and innovation proposals submitted voluntarily by teachers. This aligns with Meyer et al., who highlight that supportive leadership environments promote teacher experimentation, reflective practice, and long-term professional competence (Meyer et al., 2022).

The findings of this study demonstrate that empowerment-oriented leadership plays a central role in strengthening teacher professionalism across the three participating schools. Distributed authority, participatory decision-making, and open communication fostered a sense of ownership that motivated teachers to elevate their

professional standards (Jiang et al., 2019). Empowering leadership enhances teacher agency and responsibility (Tindowen, 2019). Moreover, institutional structures—such as Innovation Teams and MGMP-based working groups—ensured that shared leadership was not merely symbolic but embedded in school governance. The collaborative culture promoted by principals further supported teachers in assuming leadership roles, contributing to a professional environment where innovation is encouraged and recognized. Consistent with Suriansyah, recognition mechanisms such as certificates and newsletters strengthened teachers' confidence to lead initiatives, reinforcing the link between empowerment and professional growth (Suriansyah et al., 2019).

Designing a Strategically Led Empowerment-Based CPD (E-CPD) Model for Strengthening Teacher Professionalism

A strategically led E-CPD model begins with a clear empowerment-oriented vision that positions teachers as co-architects of their professional growth. In all three schools, principals emphasized that CPD must be driven by teachers' needs, not only administrative directives. P1 stated, *"Teachers should be in the center; they know their challenges better than anyone."* This approach encouraged teachers to identify their competencies through reflective self-assessment and peer discussions. Teachers acknowledged that this collaborative vision-setting helped them focus on CPD activities that strengthened instructional quality, with T1 noting that it *"makes learning more meaningful and connected to real classroom needs."*

The second component of the E-CPD model involves designing a structured yet flexible CPD framework co-created between school leaders and teachers. Evidence from DocA shows annual CPD plans outlining cycles of peer coaching, lesson study, professional reading circles, and digital competency workshops. P2 emphasized, *"The structure keeps us moving, but flexibility lets teachers adapt it to their contexts."* Teachers validated this sentiment, with T2 explaining that while guidelines were helpful, autonomy to adjust schedules and focus areas *"made CPD less burdensome and more meaningful."* This balance of structure and autonomy aligns with Steyn, who argued that professional development is most effective when formal planning intersects with teacher agency (Steyn, 2011). Thus, a strategically led E-CPD model must provide a flexible scaffold that encourages professional experimentation.

Contextual relevance is another critical component of the model, ensuring that E-CPD responds to each school's socio-cultural and instructional realities. For example, School 1 focused on digital pedagogy due to limited ICT readiness among teachers, while School 3 prioritized inclusive teaching because of its diverse student demographics. P3 articulated, *"We cannot copy other schools; our CPD must be created based on our real problems."* Teachers agreed, with T3 stating that context-driven initiatives helped them *"see CPD as a solution rather than an administrative task."* Document evidence (DocB) highlighted needs assessments and CPD mapping exercises adapted to each school's challenges.

The fourth component involves building collaborative learning cultures that position teachers as experts and co-leaders of CPD. Across all three schools, principals deliberately created collaborative structures such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), mentorship groups, and interdisciplinary teams. P1 described, *"Collaboration is not optional here; it is part of our professional identity."* Teachers appreciated that collaboration elevated professionalism by allowing them to engage in collective problem-solving, peer reflection, and shared instructional innovation. T2 noted that peer-led learning *"feels empowering because we learn from each other, not only from external trainers."*

The strategically led E-CPD model also requires creating a psychologically safe environment in which teachers feel encouraged to innovate without fear of failure. In all three schools, principals emphasized supportive supervision and non-punitive feedback. P2 stated, *"Professionalism grows when teachers are trusted to try new things."* Teachers echoed this, with T1 mentioning that psychological safety *"makes us more confident to implement creative teaching strategies."* Document review (DocC) revealed reflective journals, innovation proposals, and lesson study reports that captured teachers' experimentation processes. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) argue that safe, reflective environments are essential for cultivating continuous professional learning and deep instructional improvement. Thus, psychological safety is a foundational pillar of the E-CPD model.

Finally, sustainability mechanisms ensure that E-CPD remains an ongoing and evolving system rather than a one-time activity. Principals in all schools employed monitoring tools, periodic evaluation meetings, and teacher-led reporting systems to ensure continuity of professional learning. P3 highlighted, *"CPD must continue beyond workshops; it needs follow-up, monitoring, and reflection."* Teachers recognized the value of these mechanisms, with T3 sharing that sustained follow-up *"helps us maintain consistency and see our growth over time."* Document evidence showed annual review reports and CPD improvement plans that guided long-term development. Sustained, iterative processes are crucial for long-lasting professional learning. Thus, sustainability and evaluation form the final core dimension of the strategically led E-CPD model.

The findings of this study demonstrate that strategic leadership plays a decisive role in shaping how Empowerment-Based Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD) is conceptualized, enacted, and sustained

across school contexts. Principals in all three schools operationalized empowerment by positioning teachers as co-constructors of professional growth, enabling shared decision-making, and ensuring that CPD priorities emerge from teachers' authentic instructional challenges. This aligns with Nooruddin assertion that strategic leadership must begin with collective goal-setting to foster ownership of improvement (Nooruddin & Bhamani, 2019). The evidence further suggests that empowerment is strengthened through structured yet flexible CPD frameworks—such as peer coaching, lesson study, and reflective dialogue—co-created between principals and teachers. Professional development becomes more effective when formal structure intersects with teacher agency, a pattern clearly observed across all research sites (Peleman et al., 2018; Valdmann et al., 2017; Williams, 2020). Together, these findings show that strategic leadership not only guides direction but also creates the enabling conditions that make empowerment-based CPD meaningful and sustainable.

Additionally, the study reveals that contextual relevance, collaborative professionalism, psychological safety, and long-term sustainability mechanisms are essential dimensions of a strategically led E-CPD model. Principals tailored CPD initiatives to local needs—such as digital pedagogy or inclusive teaching—that context-rich CPD enhances relevance and transferability (Andreev et al., 2020; Peeters et al., 2018). Collaborative professional cultures supported by PLCs, mentorship groups, and interdisciplinary teams embody Lee theory of collaborative professionalism, demonstrating that collective expertise can elevate teacher professionalism (Lee et al., 2022). The emphasis on psychological safety further reflects Ozga, who highlight supportive environments as essential for innovation and continuous improvement (Ozga & Lawn, 2017). Finally, sustainability mechanisms—such as monitoring systems, periodic evaluations, and teacher-led reporting—professional learning must be iterative and long-term to yield lasting change (Jensen & Iannone, 2018; Oyenuga et al., 2020; Peleman et al., 2018; Shonhe, 2020). Collectively, these insights confirm that strategically led empowerment-oriented leadership forms a robust foundation for advancing teacher professionalism through an E-CPD model.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Empowerment-Based Continuous Professional Development (E-CPD) offers a transformative framework for advancing teacher professionalism through a holistic integration of empowerment, reflective practice, and collaborative learning. Findings highlight that teacher development is most effective when educators are positioned as active agents who design, implement, and evaluate their own learning experiences. In this context, strategic leadership plays a critical role by creating supportive structures, promoting shared decision-making, and fostering a culture of continuous learning within schools. The alignment between empowerment strategies and professional development mechanisms ensures that teachers not only acquire new competencies but also develop a sustained sense of self-efficacy and professional identity. Moreover, the evidence suggests that empowerment within CPD enhances motivation, strengthens pedagogical innovation, and contributes to sustainable improvements in instructional quality. This underscores that teacher professionalism flourishes when CPD systems value autonomy, collaboration, and contextual relevance.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the need for school leaders to adopt strategic and transformational approaches that prioritize teachers' voices, needs, and aspirations. Leaders must cultivate professional ecosystems that encourage experimentation, mentorship, and knowledge-sharing, enabling teachers to shape their developmental pathways based on authentic classroom challenges. The integration of strategic leadership within E-CPD fosters a school-wide culture of trust, distributed leadership, and evidence-based practice—factors that significantly influence long-term teacher growth. The research also reveals that successful E-CPD initiatives depend on clear vision, resource optimization, and consistent use of data to inform professional learning decisions. By embedding empowerment principles into CPD governance, schools can enhance teacher agency and build resilient professional communities capable of adapting to evolving educational demands. Ultimately, E-CPD demonstrates considerable potential to advance teacher professionalism through the synergy of empowerment and strategic leadership, offering a sustainable model for future CPD policy and practice.

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