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# Examining the factors that promote a culture of innovation among teachers in Eswatini

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## Abstract

This study explores teachers' understandings and practices of innovation in teaching, highlighting the factors that enable or constrain its implementation. Using qualitative interpretivist design, this study employed purposive sampling to include 21 participants, consisting of 14 classroom teachers, 5 school principals, and 2 education officers from primary and secondary schools. Data gathered from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were thematically analysed. Findings indicate that teachers perceive innovation as a purposeful, learner-centred process that integrates problem-solving, adaptive strategies, and technology to address diverse student needs. The study identifies school culture, leadership support, professional collaboration, and alignment with personal beliefs and professional goals as critical enablers of innovative teaching. Conversely, resource limitations, rigid curricula, and resistance to change are significant barriers. Teachers' agency, professional judgment, and values mediate these influences, underscoring that effective innovation results from the interplay between systemic structures, collaborative practices, and individual commitment. Based on these insights, the study recommends systemic interventions, including continuous professional development, adequate resourcing, and structured platforms for collaboration. Leadership approaches that encourage autonomy, shared decision-making, and access to instructional and technological resources can empower teachers to experiment and sustain innovative practices. Furthermore, fostering professional learning communities and cross-school networks can enhance collegial support and collective problem-solving, enabling the co-construction of knowledge and contextually responsive innovation. These findings contribute to understanding how systemic, collaborative, and individual factors converge to shape teaching innovation, offering practical guidance for policy and practice aimed at advancing learner-centred, adaptive, and sustainable educational innovations.

**Keywords:** *innovation in teaching, learner-centred pedagogy, professional learning communities, teacher agency, educational leadership, technology integration*

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## 1. Introduction

Understanding teacher innovation requires moving beyond policy rhetoric to interrogate the institutional, cultural, and professional conditions that shape how innovation is enacted in practice. Globally, education systems are increasingly expected to foster innovation in response to rapid social, technological, and economic transformations. This expectation places schools under pressure to cultivate environments in which creativity, adaptability, and reflective practice are embedded within teachers' professional lives (Mokhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Within this context, a supportive innovation climate characterised by psychological safety, empowerment, and collective efficacy has been shown to significantly enhance teachers' innovative work behaviours and their willingness to experiment with new pedagogical approaches (Mudavanhu & Mpofu, 2025). Similarly, organisational culture and strategic leadership play a central role in shaping innovation by encouraging idea generation, legitimising risk-taking, and sustaining the implementation of novel instructional practices (Granville-Chapman et al., 2024).

Effective leadership practices, particularly distributed and transformational leadership, are consistently identified as critical enablers of innovation. Leaders who foster trust, promote shared decision-making, and support teacher autonomy create enabling conditions for meaningful pedagogical change (Granville-Chapman et al., 2024). In addition, professional learning communities (PLCs) conceptualised as collaborative and reflective spaces for teacher engagement have been shown to strengthen innovative teaching by enhancing creative self-efficacy and providing sustained peer support (Qin et al., 2022). In the context of Eswatini, ongoing curriculum reforms and policy shifts emphasise learner-centred pedagogy, creativity, and problem-solving, thereby positioning teachers as central agents of educational transformation. Fostering strong professional networks, shared reflective practices, and collaborative cultures is essential, as emerging evidence suggests that such environments significantly enhance teachers' capacity to innovate (Baroroh et al., 2025).

However, innovation is not an individualised or decontextualised phenomenon; rather, it is deeply embedded within school cultures, leadership practices, professional development systems, and broader socio-political contexts. Transformative professional learning, coupled with sustained institutional support, is necessary to translate policy aspirations into meaningful classroom practice (Mokhlis & Abdullah, 2025). From this

perspective, cultivating a culture of innovation requires attention not only to individual teacher competencies but also to the structural and relational conditions that enable experimentation, adaptation, and the scaling of innovative practices within Eswatini's education system.

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by foregrounding teachers' voices and examining the contextual, social, and cultural conditions that enable or constrain innovative teaching practices. In doing so, this advances a context-sensitive and theoretically grounded conceptualisation of innovation as a socially mediated and culturally embedded process, rather than a narrow focus on the adoption of discrete techniques or technologies (e.g., digital tools) that are often detached from local educational realities (Mudavanhu & Mpofu, 2025; Amemasor et al., 2025). This framing is particularly important in Global South contexts, where the transfer of innovation models often fails to account for contextual complexities. In response to the need to better understand innovation within this context, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors promote a culture of innovation among teachers in Eswatini?
2. How do teachers in Eswatini experience and interpret innovation within their everyday pedagogical practices?
3. What institutional, cultural, and contextual conditions enable or constrain innovative teaching?
4. How do teachers negotiate policy expectations and professional identities in the enactment of innovation?

Despite strong policy commitments to educational reform and innovation, there remains a paucity of empirical research examining how teachers in Eswatini experience, interpret, and enact innovation within their everyday pedagogical practice. While regional and international scholarship has identified key enablers and constraints including professional development, contextual limitations, and collaborative practices such work rarely centres teachers lived experiences in small African states (Amemasor et al., 2025; Basister et al., 2025). Existing evidence further suggests that effective teacher professional development for innovation, particularly in relation to digital instructional integration, requires sustained collaboration, institutional support, and ongoing engagement, although implementation outcomes remain highly context dependent. In addition, collaborative pedagogical approaches such as lesson study have been shown to foster innovation and

inclusive educational environments, underscoring the importance of teacher agency and peer interaction in shaping instructional change. This aligns with broader scholarship emphasising that meaningful educational change is mediated by teachers' interpretations, identities, and contextual realities rather than policy intentions alone (Fullan, 2016). Nevertheless, there is still limited understanding of how teachers in Eswatini navigate policy demands, institutional constraints, and their own professional identities in the enactment of innovative practice.

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## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Teacher Innovation and School Culture*

Teacher innovation is increasingly recognised as a critical driver of educational transformation, particularly in contexts characterised by rapid social, economic, and technological change. It involves the intentional introduction and application of new ideas, pedagogical strategies, and processes aimed at enhancing student learning and engagement (Shibiru & Bekele, 2024). Rather than being an isolated individual attribute, innovation is deeply embedded within the cultural ecology of schools.

A growing body of research demonstrates that school culture, particularly elements such as trust, shared vision, and openness to collaboration, plays a pivotal role in shaping teachers' capacity to innovate. Supportive and collegial environments enable teachers to move beyond routine practices and engage in reflective experimentation. This suggests that innovation is less about individual creativity alone and more about the extent to which institutional environments legitimise and sustain risk-taking and professional dialogue. However, while existing studies highlight the enabling role of positive school cultures, they often under-theorise how these cultural conditions are negotiated in resource-constrained contexts, pointing to a need for more contextually grounded analyses.

### *2.2. Structural Constraints and Innovation in Sub-Saharan Africa*

Within Sub-Saharan Africa, efforts to promote teacher innovation are frequently mediated by structural constraints, including high workloads, limited teaching and learning resources, and rigid curriculum frameworks (Oshuporu et al., 2024). These conditions often restrict teachers' ability to experiment with new pedagogical approaches, thereby reinforcing compliance-oriented practices. However, the literature also reveals a more subtle picture. Teachers are not merely passive recipients of structural limitations; rather, they demonstrate

considerable agency by adapting available resources and contextualising instructional practices to meet diverse learner needs. This aligns with regional scholarship that conceptualises innovation as embedded within everyday classroom practices rather than as a purely top-down policy directive (Oshuporu et al., 2024).

At the same time, systemic limitations remain significant. A synthesis of teacher professional development (TPD) initiatives in Africa highlights persistent gaps in institutional support, weak policy alignment, and limited data-driven decision-making, all of which constrain the sustainability and scalability of innovation (Mitchell et al., 2024). This tension between teacher agency and structural constraint is central to understanding innovation in Eswatini, where policy aspirations often outpace institutional capacity.

### *2.3. Leadership Practices and Innovation Culture*

Educational leadership is widely acknowledged as a critical lever for fostering a culture of innovation. Leadership practices that promote distributed responsibility, shared decision-making, and reflective dialogue create conditions in which teachers feel empowered to experiment with new instructional approaches. Distributed leadership has been associated with increased teacher engagement and pedagogical agency, as it decentralises authority and recognises teachers as active contributors to school improvement processes (Shibiru & Bekele, 2024).

Contextual evidence from Southern Africa reinforces the importance of leadership in shaping school culture and instructional quality. For instance, research in Eswatini indicates that principals' instructional leadership practices such as articulating clear goals, supporting teacher development, and fostering collaborative environments are positively associated with school improvement efforts that underpin innovation (Tshabalala, 2024). Nevertheless, leadership alone is not sufficient. A critical reading of the literature suggests that leadership practices must be embedded within broader organisational systems that sustain teacher participation and innovation over time. Without such systemic alignment, leadership-driven initiatives risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

### *2.4. Professional Learning Communities and Collaborative Innovation*

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are widely conceptualised as structured forms of collaborative professional practice that promote shared inquiry, reflective dialogue,

and continuous professional development. Through sustained engagement in activities such as joint lesson planning, peer observation, and reflective discussion, PLCs enable teachers to co-construct knowledge and refine instructional practices (Christensen & Jerrim, 2025). Empirical studies suggest that PLCs facilitate collaborative problem-solving, peer support, and the circulation of innovative practices within schools (Rizqi & Syafika, 2024). Participation in PLCs has also been linked to enhanced professional engagement, instructional competence, and job satisfaction. However, the extent to which PLCs foster meaningful innovation varies considerably across contexts. Their effectiveness is contingent upon factors such as leadership support, institutional commitment, and resource availability (Christensen & Jerrim, 2025; Rizqi & Syafika, 2024; Plaku & Leka, 2025).

From a critical standpoint, PLCs should not be romanticised as inherently transformative. In under-resourced contexts, they may become procedural or compliance-driven rather than genuinely reflective spaces. This underscores the importance of examining how PLCs are enacted in practice, rather than assuming their effectiveness based on formal structures alone.

### *2.5. Innovation as a Socially Mediated Practice*

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises innovation as a socially mediated and contextually embedded process, rather than as the mere adoption of new technologies or techniques. This perspective emphasises the interplay between individual agency, institutional structures, and cultural norms in shaping how innovation is interpreted and enacted (Oshuporu et al., 2024; Mitchell et al., 2024). Research further highlights that teachers' professional identities, beliefs, and contextual realities influence their engagement with innovation. Teachers actively interpret policy expectations and adapt them to their local contexts, resulting in diverse enactments of innovation across settings. For example, studies indicate that teachers' capacity to contribute to school transformation is shaped by both their sense of professional agency and the degree of organisational support they receive (Rosenlund & Edelmann, 2024). Similarly, innovation is increasingly understood as a situated practice influenced by school culture, leadership dynamics, and structural conditions, rather than as a decontextualised competency (Liu et al., 2024).

Fostering a culture of innovation in Eswatini requires a multidimensional approach. Effective leadership, collaborative professional structures such as PLCs, and supportive

school cultures must interact with broader contextual realities including resource constraints and systemic pressures to shape how innovation is realised in practice. This reinforces my position that innovation should be understood not as a discrete outcome but as an ongoing, negotiated process embedded within complex educational environments.

### *2.6. Theoretical Framework*

This study is guided by Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which provides a socio-cultural and systemic lens for examining teacher innovation as a situated, mediated, and collective process rather than a set of isolated individual behaviours. Aligned with the research questions that seek to explore the factors promoting innovation, teachers lived experiences, and the contextual conditions shaping practice, CHAT foregrounds the dynamic interaction between individual agency and structural influences. Rooted in the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978) and further developed by Alexei Leontiev and Yrjö Engeström (2014), the theory conceptualises human activity as a system comprising subjects, tools, rules, community, division of labour, and object-oriented outcomes. This activity system shifts the analytical focus from individual cognition to the broader socio-cultural context, enabling a holistic understanding of how innovation emerges through the interplay of mediating tools (e.g., curricula and technologies), institutional rules, and social relations within schools. The strength of CHAT lies in its ability to capture the complexity of innovation in contexts such as Eswatini, where teachers' practices are simultaneously shaped by policy demands, institutional structures, and cultural norms.

A key justification for adopting CHAT over more individualistic frameworks is its emphasis on contradictions and expansive learning as drivers of innovation. Contradictions, understood as historically accumulated tensions within or between elements of an activity system, create opportunities for reflection, adaptation, and transformation (Cong-Lem, 2022; Engeström & Sannino, 2017). Rather than framing tensions between policy expectations and classroom realities as deficits, CHAT conceptualises them as generative forces that enable teachers to renegotiate goals, experiment with new pedagogical tools, and engage in collective learning processes. This perspective directly aligns with the study's focus on how teachers in Eswatini navigate enabling and constraining conditions in their enactment of innovation. Consequently, CHAT supports a conceptualisation of teacher innovation as a socially mediated, historically situated, and relational process, allowing for a nuanced

analysis of how innovation is constructed, negotiated, and sustained within specific institutional and cultural contexts.

## 3. Methodology

### *3.1. Research Design*

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist research design to generate in-depth and contextually grounded insights into the factors that promote a culture of innovation among teachers in Eswatini. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to explore participants lived experiences, interpretations, and meaning-making processes within their socio-cultural and institutional contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Consistent with CHAT, teacher innovation is conceptualised as a socially mediated and contextually embedded phenomenon shaped by interactions among individuals, tools, and institutional structures. This approach was particularly suitable for capturing the relational and dynamic nature of innovation, which cannot be adequately examined through quantitative methods alone.

### *3.2. Participants of the Study*

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 20 participants from primary and secondary schools across selected regions of Eswatini. The sample included 14 classroom teachers, 5 school principals, and 2 education officers, ensuring diverse perspectives across different levels of the education system. This technique was appropriate as it allowed for the selection of information-rich participants with direct experience in teaching, leadership, and policy implementation (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Patton, 2015). The sample size was sufficient for qualitative inquiry and guided by the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new themes or insights emerged (Guest et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2018). Including multiple stakeholder groups strengthened the study by capturing the systemic and relational dimensions of innovation, consistent with CHAT.

### *3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process*

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to articulate their experiences while ensuring that key themes such as leadership, professional learning, and curriculum reform were

consistently explored. Focus group discussions facilitated interaction and collective reflection, generating deeper insights into shared practices and social dynamics. Data collection followed a systematic process: participants were informed about the study, consent was obtained, and sessions were conducted in convenient settings. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness.

### *3.4. Data Analysis*

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework. The process involved familiarisation with the data, initial coding, identification of themes, review and refinement of themes, and interpretation. Both inductive and theoretically informed coding were employed, allowing themes to emerge from the data while also being interpreted through the lens of CHAT. This approach enabled an analysis of how innovation is shaped by interactions between individual agency and structural conditions. In my view, thematic analysis was particularly appropriate for capturing patterns across participants' experiences while maintaining sensitivity to context and meaning.

### *3.5. Trustworthiness of the Study*

To ensure the rigor of the study, strategies for establishing trustworthiness were employed, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and the use of multiple data sources (interviews and focus groups), which allowed for triangulation and a deeper understanding of participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail of the research process, documenting methodological decisions and analytical procedures in a transparent manner (Nowell et al., 2017). Confirmability was supported through reflexivity and the systematic documentation of analytical decisions, ensuring that findings were grounded in the data rather than researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was achieved by providing rich, thick descriptions of the research context, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings (Creswell & Poth, 2023). These strategies strengthened the overall credibility, consistency, and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings.

### *3.6. Research Ethics*

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Director of Education in the Ministry of Education and Training in Eswatini prior to data collection. Ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly observed. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To protect privacy, pseudonyms were used, and all data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. Ensuring participants' safety and well-being was prioritised throughout the research process, thereby maintaining the integrity and credibility of the study.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

Table 1 presents the summary of the themes generated from the study.

**Table 1**

*Thematic analysis of factors influencing a culture of innovation among teachers in Eswatini*

| Theme | Analytic Focus | Illustrative Excerpts | Theoretical Link |
|---|---|---|---|
| Innovation as Adaptive and Problem-Solving Practice | Teachers conceptualise innovation as adopting new approaches and technologies to address learning challenges and learner diversity. | *"Coming up with practice that is intended to solve and improve learning and teaching."; "Solving problems using a different approach altogether."* | Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory – innovation as adoption of new ideas to improve practice; Constructivist Learning Theory |
| 2. School Culture as a Catalyst or Constraint | School culture shapes teachers' willingness to experiment, with conservative environments discouraging change and collaborative cultures enabling innovation. | *"A very conservative system… It's harder to implement change."; "Teachers encourage experimenting and continuous improvement."* | Organisational Culture Theory (Schein); Fullan's Theory of Educational Change |
| 3. Collaborative Professional Practice | Collaboration through co-teaching, departmental teamwork, and professional networks enhances shared learning and innovative pedagogy. | *"We co-teach… teachers help one another."; "We share ideas, plan lessons, set tests together."* | Communities of Practice (Wenger); Social Learning Theory |
| 4. Leadership Support and Shared Decision-Making | Leadership practices that promote autonomy, trust, and shared decision-making strengthen teachers' confidence to innovate. | *"They encourage and create platforms to share experiences."; "Shared decision-making… boosts confidence to try new things."* | Transformational Leadership Theory; Distributed Leadership |

| Theme | Analytic Focus | Illustrative Excerpts | Theoretical Link |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5. Resource and Infrastructure Limitations | Limited access to technology, finances, and internet infrastructure constrains innovative teaching, requiring improvisation by teachers. | *"Limited resources and access to gadgets by learners."; "We improvise as teachers."* | Resource-Based View of Organisations; Digital Divide Theory |
| 6. Curriculum, Assessment, and Policy Alignment | Innovation is mediated by curriculum demands and assessment requirements, which can both enable alignment and restrict flexibility. | *"Assessment objectives serve as a map."; "Innovation aligns with learning objectives but sometimes limits innovation."* | Curriculum Alignment Theory; Policy Enactment Theory |
| 7. Teacher Beliefs, Values, and Professional Identity | Personal beliefs in learner-centred teaching, technology, and professional growth motivate teachers to adopt innovative practices. | *"I believe in student-centred learning."; "Innovation is key in education."* | Teacher Belief Systems; Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura) |
| 8. Systemic Support for Sustaining Innovation | Teachers emphasise the need for training, resources, parental involvement, and institutional platforms to sustain innovation. | *"Provide adequate resources and more workshops."; "Create platforms to share each teacher's experience."* | Systems Theory in Education; Sustainable Change Theory |

### *Theme 1: Understanding and Defining Innovation in Teaching*

Teachers' understandings of innovation in teaching were multifaceted yet broadly convergent, with innovation primarily framed as purposeful problem-solving, responsiveness to learners' needs, and the strategic integration of technology. Rather than viewing innovation as mere novelty, participants consistently emphasised its intentional and context-responsive nature. This aligns with scholarship that conceptualises pedagogical innovation as the deliberate design of learning environments that address diverse learner needs through approaches such as inquiry-based learning, problem-solving, and adaptive teaching (OECD, 2018; Basister et al., 2025). In this sense, innovation was understood as a process of continuous improvement grounded in classroom realities rather than as the adoption of externally imposed practices.

A strong emphasis was also placed on learner-centredness and inclusion. Teachers highlighted the importance of recognising learner diversity and adapting pedagogical strategies accordingly, reflecting principles of inclusive education that prioritise

differentiated and participatory teaching approaches (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Technology, while frequently mentioned, was not viewed as an end in itself but as a pedagogical tool that enhances teaching and learning when used purposefully. Participants described using digital tools to support formative assessment, engagement, and feedback, which is consistent with research demonstrating that technology can enhance learning outcomes when meaningfully integrated into instructional design (Beatty & Gerace, 2009; Godsk & Møller, 2024).

***Theme 2: School Culture and Its Impact on Innovation***

School culture emerged as a critical factor influencing innovation, acting both as an enabler and a barrier. Supportive and collaborative environments empowered teachers to experiment and refine their practices, with participants noting that *"teachers encourage experimenting and continuous improvement."* Such collaboration and openness foster adaptive expertise and risk-taking, which are essential for innovation (Fullan, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020). Conversely, conservative systems and resistance to change constrained innovation, reflecting *"a very conservative system where leadership depends on government for improvement."* These observations highlight how bureaucratic control, limited resources, and cultural inertia can impede creative practices (Bryk et al., 2015; Deal & Peterson, 2016). Therefore, a positive, collaborative school culture enhances innovation, whereas hierarchical and rigid structures pose significant challenges.

***Theme 3: Collaboration and Professional Learning Communities***

Collaboration within PLCs emerged as a key enabler of innovation, which fosters shared practice, peer support, and collective problem-solving. Teachers reported that *"we co-teach, when one teacher does not understand a concept…they will ask a teacher to help them teach that topic"* and that *"with colleagues, more especially at departmental level, we collaborate very well as we share ideas…also teach for each other in certain topics."* These interactions enabled teachers to draw on one another's expertise, mitigate individual knowledge gaps, and experiment with new pedagogical approaches. Ministry-supported workshops further extended these networks, allowing cross-school exchange of skills and ideas, as one participant noted, *"Scheduled teacher workshops are made available by the Ministry…skills, ideas and approaches are shared amongst ourselves."* Such practices align

with research describing PLCs as sustained, job-embedded professional development that fosters reflective practice, shared accountability, and instructional innovation rather than isolated teaching (Admiraal et al., 2021). When supported structurally through leadership, policy, and dedicated time, collaboration enhances teachers' professional agency and increases the likelihood of sustained innovation (Hadar et al., 2020). Conversely, superficial or sporadic collaboration may limit transformative potential.

***Theme 4: Leadership Support and Enabling Structures***

Supportive and enabling leadership emerged as a critical driver of teachers' innovative practices through the provision of resources, professional autonomy, and collaborative structures. Participants highlighted leadership efforts to cultivate professional dialogue and shared learning, noting that *"they encourage and create platforms to share each teacher's experience."* Such practices align with recent scholarship emphasising teacher leadership and distributed influence as key mechanisms for fostering innovation and collective professional learning (Ghamrawi & Shal, 2025) Access to material and technological resources was equally important, with one teacher explaining that *"my school leader support and encourages every teacher's efforts by making sure they supply the school or teachers with everything they need for teaching…access to school WiFi."* This finding reflects evidence that leadership support must include tangible infrastructural and digital resources to enable pedagogical experimentation and innovation (Mphatsoane-Sesoane & Jita, 2025; OECD, 2025).

Leadership practices that promoted trust, autonomy, and shared decision-making were experienced as empowering and developmental. Teachers reported that *"these leadership practices have empowered me to design processes for completing practical tasks…within the stipulated time,"* indicating how autonomy enhanced confidence and instructional creativity. Research similarly shows that ethical and transformational leadership strengthens teacher agency, self-efficacy, and innovative behaviour (Leithwood et al., 2020). Shared decision-making further supported collective learning, with participants noting that *"in shared decision making you learn from others…doing things as an individual allows trial and error independently."* This underscores how collaborative leadership climates reduce professional isolation and legitimise risk-taking, thereby embedding innovation as a shared and sustainable school practice (Ghamrawi & Shal, 2025).

***Theme 5: Resource Constraints and Practical Challenges***

Resource constraints, including limited access to devices, unstable internet, and insufficient financial support, significantly restrict teachers' capacity to implement innovative practices. *"Limited resources and also limited access to gadgets by learners…we try to mitigate this by providing printed and photocopied materials."* Such barriers reflect persistent digital divides, where inequitable access to technology undermines pedagogical transformation and limits opportunities for meaningful technology integration (Okenwa-Fadele et al., 2025) In these contexts, teachers often rely on improvisation and alternative strategies, which sustain teaching but restrict innovation to coping mechanisms rather than systemic change.

In addition to material shortages, learner readiness and digital discipline also challenge innovation. Teachers noted that *"most learners do not have discipline when it comes to the use of technological gadgets…some learners use the gadgets to share their individual work which makes it difficult,"* and highlighted *"financial incapability, lack of skilled technicians, gadgets and stable internet"* as compounding factors. Research indicates that successful innovation depends not only on access to technology but also on students' digital literacy, responsible use, and ongoing technical and pedagogical support (Egwim & Rasul, 2025; Ranbir, 2024). Without such coordinated support, teachers' innovative efforts remain fragile and reliant on individual improvisation, limiting sustainable instructional transformation.

***Theme 6: Curriculum, Assessment, and Policy Influence***

Curriculum requirements, assessment expectations, and school policies play a critical role in shaping teachers' innovative practices, sometimes enabling creativity and at other times constraining flexibility. Structured curriculum frameworks and assessment standards provide a clear roadmap for teaching, which guides educators toward intended learning outcomes. As one participant noted, *"It requires me to have an understanding of the assessment objectives which serves as a map to navigate through the various teaching methods."* Similarly, adherence to institutional policies ensures alignment with learning objectives and measurable outcomes, although it may limit experimental approaches: *"They ensure that innovation in teaching still aligns with learning objectives, measurable outcomes and institutional standards but sometimes limit innovation"* (OECD, 2024; Ralebese et al.,

2025). Research shows that rigid assessment and high-stakes accountability environments can reduce teachers' willingness to explore novel strategies, while flexible assessment practices and supportive leadership encourage adaptation and creativity (Zipper-Weber, 2025).

Teachers' agency and professional judgement mediate the impact of curriculum and policy on innovation. When educators are empowered to interpret curriculum goals and adapt policies creatively such as modifying rules to introduce blended learning or engaging learners for input, they are more likely to implement effective, contextually relevant innovations: *"We modify policies or rules before introducing new teaching methods like blended learning and engage learners for input."* Professional collaboration, ongoing development, and supportive leadership further enhance this capacity, highlighting that curriculum and policy influence is not inherently restrictive but depends on flexibility, interpretive openness, and alignment with teacher autonomy (Liu et al., 2024; Ralebese et al., 2025; Qin et al., 2025). Systems that balance structured guidance with adaptive professional discretion are most likely to foster meaningful and sustainable innovation in teaching.

***Theme 7: Personal Beliefs, Values, and Professional Goals as Drivers***

Teachers' personal beliefs, values, and professional goals strongly influenced their motivation to innovate and the strategies they employed in the classroom. When teachers' internal value systems aligned with their professional responsibilities, they demonstrated greater commitment to creative approaches, resilience in the face of challenges, and reflective practice (OECD, 2019). One teacher emphasized the sustaining power of spiritual conviction: *"Fortunately for me the subject I teach aligns with my personal beliefs and values…I employ my belief that with God I can leap over walls and run through troops."* Such deeply held beliefs can provide purpose and motivation that extend beyond technical or curricular requirements (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Pedagogical values also shaped teachers' priorities and innovation. Commitment to student-centered learning and critical thinking influenced both instructional focus and adaptive strategies: *"I believe in student-centered learning and promoting critical thinking to the learners…they influence innovation positively as they guide what you prioritize and how you adapt methods."* Reflection on personal engagement further supported innovative practice: *"Teachers can gather insight from what engages and motivates them."* These

findings align with research highlighting that teacher beliefs, identity, and self-awareness are central to agency and pedagogical innovation (Biesta et al., 2015; Day & Gu, 2010; Kagan, 1992; Richardson, 1996). Supporting teachers' personal and professional values is therefore essential for fostering meaningful and sustainable innovation in education.

***Theme 8: Recommendations for Enhancing Innovation***

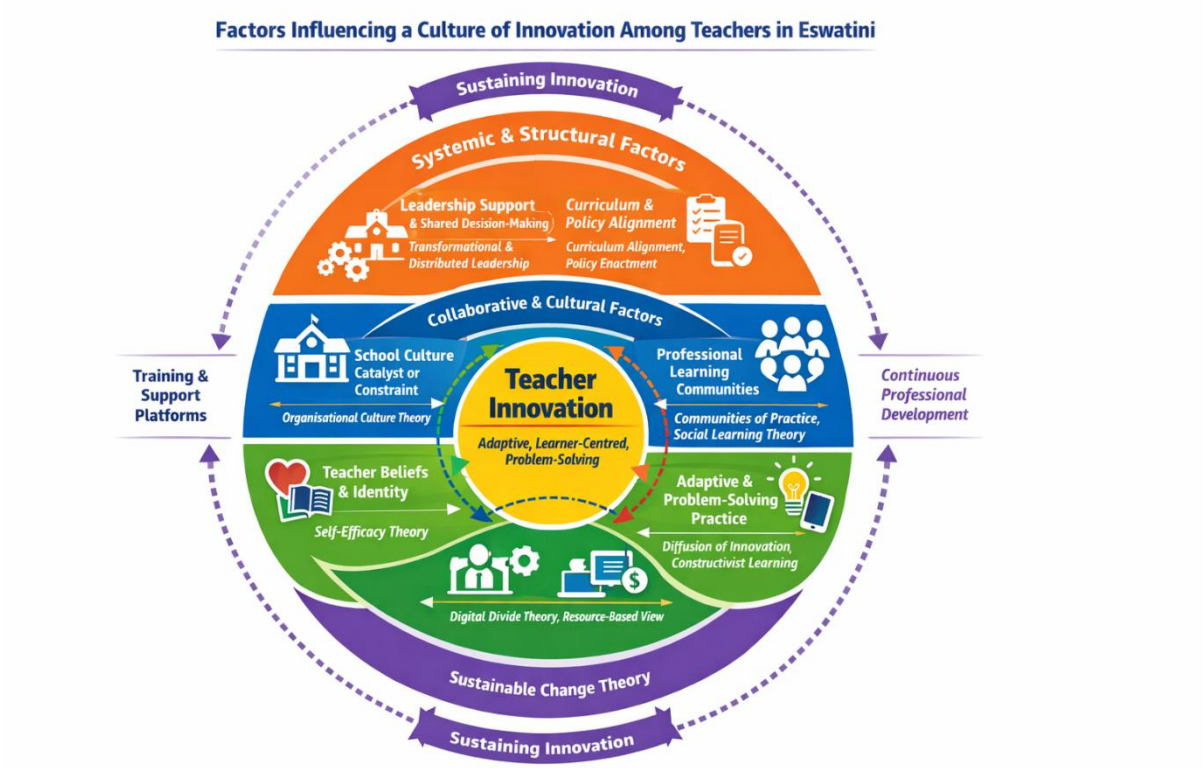
Teachers in this study highlighted the need for strengthened systemic support to foster innovation, and the need for continual professional growth, adequate resourcing, and stronger collaboration. Their calls for increased workshops and updated training reflect research showing that tailored professional development and collaborative communities significantly enhance teachers' innovative capacities and instructional practices (Ahmad et al., 2025; Qin, et al., 2025). *"Provide adequate resources to maximize learning outcomes and have more workshops that will equip teachers to keep being up to date."* and *"The Ministry of Education has to make it a priority that teachers attend in-service workshops on new ways of teaching that include innovation."* These suggestions align with evidence that professional learning environments supporting experience sharing, peer networks, and reflective practice are catalysts for sustained creative pedagogical change (Basister et al., 2025).

Participants also stressed the importance of platforms for experience sharing and collaboration that underlines the social dimension of innovative practice. *"Create platforms to share each teacher's experience."* This resonates with findings that structured collaboration such as lesson studies and other collegial practices foster deeper pedagogical innovation and inclusive learning by enabling teachers to co-construct knowledge and refine strategies collectively (Basister et al., 2025). Enhancing innovation is not solely an individual task but requires coordinated systemic investments in professional development, resource provision, and collaborative infrastructures that empower teachers as active agents of change.

The framework illustrated in Figure 1 shows the factors influencing a culture of teacher innovation in Eswatini, with "Teacher Innovation" at the center representing adaptive, learner-centered, problem-solving teaching. Surrounding this core, individual (green), collaborative/cultural (blue), and systemic/structural (orange) factors interact to enable or constrain innovative practices. The outer purple layer of "Sustaining Innovation" highlights continuous professional development and systemic support that maintain and scale innovation, reflecting the dynamic interplay of these factors through a CHAT-informed lens.

**Figure 1**

*Factors shaping teacher innovation in Eswatini*




## 5. Conclusion

This study reveals that teachers understand innovation as a purposeful, learner-centred process that integrates problem-solving, adaptive strategies, and technology to meet diverse student needs. Guided by the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), the findings highlight how systemic structures (e.g., curricula, resources), collaborative practices (e.g., professional learning communities, leadership support), and individual agency interact to shape teachers' capacity and motivation to innovate. Supportive environments enable experimentation and reflective practice, whereas resource limitations, rigid curricula, and resistance to change constrain innovation. Teachers' professional judgment and alignment with personal beliefs mediate these influences, demonstrating that effective innovation emerges from the dynamic interplay of systemic, social, and individual factors. Practically, the study underscores the need for sustained professional development, flexible curricula, and collaborative platforms that foster reflective practice and experience-sharing, and offers

actionable guidance for school leaders and policymakers seeking to cultivate and sustain innovative teaching practices.

## 6. Recommendations

***Professional development.*** To enhance innovation in teaching, schools and education authorities should provide continuous, contextually relevant professional development. Regular workshops and training programs that emphasize reflective practice, adaptive strategies, and student-centred pedagogies can support teachers in integrating new approaches and technologies effectively.

***Leadership support.*** Leadership practices play a critical role in enabling teacher innovation. School leaders should promote autonomy, shared decision-making, and provide access to technological and instructional resources. By fostering supportive and enabling leadership, teachers are empowered to experiment, reflect, and sustain creative practices within their classrooms.

***Collaboration and professional networks.*** Structured collaborative platforms, such as professional learning communities and inter-school experience-sharing networks, can strengthen collegial support and collective problem-solving. These networks allow teachers to co-construct knowledge, share best practices, and implement contextually responsive innovations more effectively.

***Resources and systemic support.*** Adequate resourcing, including teaching materials, technological tools, and flexible curricula, is essential for sustaining innovative practices. Systemic interventions should ensure that schools are equipped to address both material and structural constraints, enabling teachers to translate creative ideas into consistent classroom practice.

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### Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Eswatini College of Theology. Ethical approval and formal clearance to conduct the research were obtained from the Ministry of Education and Training in Eswatini.

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### AI Declaration

The authors declare the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the authors used ChatGPT in grammar editing, summarizing key points and paraphrasing ideas. The author takes full responsibility in ensuring proper review and editing of contents generated using AI.

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