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Exploring Urban-Rural Disparities in Teachers' Professional Development and Classroom Management Practices in Delta State Public Secondary Schools, Nigeria

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Abstract

This research examined the differences between urban and rural teachers in their participation in professional development programmes and their application of classroom management strategies in public secondary schools within Delta State, Nigeria. Prompted by increasing concerns about lack of teachers' continuous professional growth and effectiveness, the study concentrated on two main areas: the classroom management strategies in use and the extent of professional development engagement based on school location. Two research questions and two corresponding null hypotheses guided the investigation. The study adopted a descriptive survey design and targeted a total population of 11,988 teachers, from which 410 participants were selected through a multi-stage sampling procedure. Data collection was carried out using a validated and reliable instrument titled, "*Teachers' Professional Development and Classroom Management Strategies Questionnaire (TPDCMSQ)*". Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were applied to address the research questions, while independent t-tests were used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 significance level. The results showed statistically significant differences between urban and rural teachers, both in their classroom management practices and in their levels of involvement in professional development activities. Descriptive statistics highlighted a general preference for reinforcement and relationship-building as key management techniques among both teacher groups. The study concluded that school location does have a significant influence in teachers' approach to classroom management and in their engagement in professional learning, with the mean scores of urban teachers being higher than those of their rural counterparts. It recommended that policy makers should promote diverse professional development activities that foster improved classroom management techniques applicable across and unique to urban and rural contexts to ensure equity and consistency in teaching effectiveness. It is hoped that improved classroom management techniques will foster increased students engagement and consequently improved teaching - learning process, resulting in improved students' academic achievement.

Keywords: Professional development, classroom management, teacher effectiveness, urban – rural disparities.

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Introduction

Education remains one of the most powerful instruments for national development, and teachers are central to sustaining this progress through the delivery of knowledge, values, and skills. Effective teaching relies not only on subject-matter expertise but also on continuous professional growth and the ability to foster a disciplined, supportive learning environment. In Delta State, Nigeria, notable disparities between urban and rural school settings affect teacher effectiveness—particularly their access to professional development opportunities and classroom management strategies.

Professional development (PD) refers to structured learning experiences such as workshops, mentoring, peer collaboration, and in-service training, which are essential for updating teachers' skills and improving classroom practices (Onyekwelu, 2024). Empirical studies affirm that ongoing PD enhances teachers' instructional effectiveness and confidence (Olujuwon & Omiyale, 2021), yet many rural educators face logistical and infrastructural barriers that limit their participation (Onah, 2025). The ability of teachers to adapt to modern pedagogy, manage behavioral complexities in classrooms, and promote inclusive education is often enhanced through targeted professional development programmes that reflect 21st-century educational realities (Okafor & Emeka, 2022).

Classroom management—the routines and strategies teachers deploy to maintain order, encourage engagement, and reduce behavior disruptions—is equally critical to student learning outcomes. Research in Delta and neighboring regions indicates that professional development enhances teachers' use of classroom management strategies that support academic performance among students (Egborgo & Uroghome, 2021). These strategies range from reinforcement and relationship-building to rules enforcement and corrective discipline measures, depending on the context and experience of the teacher.

Urban schools often enjoy stronger infrastructure and closer proximity to training hubs, while rural schools frequently suffer deficits in resources, staffing, and professional support (Adeyemi & Issa, 2023). Teacher capacity in rural settings is further compromised by limited access to mobile-based PD platforms, poor internet connectivity, and data cost challenges (Onah, 2025). This imbalance in access has long-term implications for educational quality and equity, especially in a developing context like Nigeria where student discipline and performance are closely tied to teacher competence.

According to Odili and Eboh (2023), effective professional development not only increases teacher efficacy but also equips them with diverse behavior management techniques suited for multicultural and multi-level classrooms. Teachers who lack regular access to these programmes often rely on outdated strategies, some of which are punitive or ineffective in addressing classroom student challenges. These gaps tend to be more prominent in rural school environments where pedagogical isolation and low stakeholder engagement hinder teacher growth.

The Vygotskian sociocultural learning theory provides a suitable lens for interpreting this context. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes that children learn through interaction with others, like teachers and peers within a cultural and social framework that are more knowledgeable than others. In this regard, professional development serves as a cultural tool that fosters reflective practice, collaborative learning, and pedagogical innovation. Teachers, as learners themselves, benefit from scaffolded experiences that guide them to higher levels of classroom leadership and instructional competence (Warford, 2019). These scaffolding opportunities - the instructional practice where a teacher supports what they already know to new knowledge and abilities, and gradually removes guidance and support as students learn and become more

competent (McLeod, 2025), may not be equally distributed across urban and rural schools, creating differential teacher performance outcomes.

Moreover, the role of professional development in shaping classroom management cannot be overstated. Teachers who undergo regular PD are more likely to employ preventive and proactive strategies, such as student goal-setting, behavioral contracts, and restorative discipline, as opposed to reactive approaches that rely on punishment and exclusion (Chukwu & Nwanze, 2020). These practices contribute to safe, inclusive, and productive learning environments where student engagement and academic outcomes are optimized.

Despite policy initiatives aimed at improving teacher capacity across the country, access remains uneven. The Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) and state-level ministries have implemented in-service training modules and digital literacy campaigns to promote teacher competence, yet rural schools continue to lag in participation and impact (Nwafor & Ogundele, 2023). Inadequate monitoring and insufficient funding contribute to this disparity, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of education reforms.

Research has shown that teachers who possess higher levels of professional competence, particularly in behavior management, are more effective in classroom management (Ojo& Igbinedion, 2021). Teachers in urban schools are more frequently exposed to intervention programmes on child psychology, inclusive pedagogy, and classroom leadership—resources often lacking in rural areas. The absence of such interventions in rural contexts limits the capacity of teachers to respond to the behavioral complexities they encounter, and poor classroom control (Ijeoma & Adebayo, 2023).

While some comparative studies have examined teacher effectiveness across educational zones, few have focused specifically on how professional development and classroom management differ between urban and rural public secondary schools in Delta State. These are critical variables in the academic and social development of students, particularly in a context where school safety and discipline are top priorities.

Considering these factors, this study set out to determine whether notable differences exist in the professional development engagement and classroom management approaches of teachers in urban and rural public secondary schools in Delta State. The goal is to provide evidence that can guide policymakers, educational leaders, and curriculum developers in addressing the practical consequences of educational disparities and in promoting location-responsive teacher support initiatives. The relevance of this study is underscored by international education priorities, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes the provision of inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education alongside lifelong learning opportunities for all. Meeting this objective requires that teachers, irrespective of their school setting, are afforded equal opportunities for ongoing professional growth and access to effective classroom management frameworks (UNESCO, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

Although professional development is widely acknowledged as a key driver of teacher effectiveness, many teachers still lack the necessary exposure to updated behavioral management techniques to handle evolving student dynamics effectively. It is widely assumed that urban teachers enjoy greater access to professional development opportunities due to better infrastructure and proximity to training centers, while rural teachers often face barriers such as isolation, poor internet connectivity, and logistical constraints. These disparities may contribute to uneven teacher competencies and inconsistent classroom management practices.

The existing literature largely focuses on either urban or rural education in isolation or discusses general trends without disaggregating data by school location. This limitation leaves educational administrators, planners and stakeholders without context-specific insights needed to address inequalities and improve teacher performance systemically. Therefore, there is a compelling need for this current study, which investigates and compares the levels of professional development and the classroom management strategies employed by urban and rural public secondary school teachers in Delta State. By illuminating these differences—or lack thereof—the study will offer critical recommendations for equitable teacher training policies and more consistent classroom practices across geographic locations.

There is limited empirical evidence to confirm whether significant differences exist between urban and rural teachers in these areas, particularly within the context of Delta State. Without such data, educational policies risk being generalized and ineffective. There is an urgent need to explore, empirically, whether professional development and classroom management strategies truly vary by school location. This study therefore seeks to fill that gap by comparing urban and rural teachers' experiences in professional development and classroom control, providing insights necessary for equitable, evidence-based intervention across school settings.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the differences in professional development and classroom management strategies between urban and rural teachers in public secondary schools in Delta State. Specifically, the study sought to:

Research Questions

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the level of professional development among teachers in urban and rural public secondary schools in Delta State?
2. What are the common classroom management strategies adopted by teachers in urban and rural public secondary schools in Delta State?

Hypotheses

The study was further guided by two hypotheses, which were tested at a 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of teachers in urban and rural public secondary schools in Delta State on the level of professional development.
2. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of teachers in urban and rural public secondary schools in Delta State on the classroom management common strategies they adopt.

Research Method

The study employed a descriptive survey research design, deemed suitable as it enables the collection and analysis of data from a defined population without altering any variables. This approach is particularly effective for examining opinions, behaviours, and characteristics within large groups, such as teachers working in varied school locations (Peretomode & Peretomode, 2015).

The target population consisted of all 11,988 teachers in public secondary schools across Delta State, Nigeria. From this, a sample of 410 teachers was selected using a multi-stage sampling method to ensure proportional representation of both urban and rural settings.

Initially, schools were stratified by location, after which simple random sampling was applied to select the schools and teachers within each category.

Data were gathered using a modified version of a standardized structured questionnaire titled *Teachers' Professional Development and Classroom Management Strategies Questionnaire* (TPDCMSQ). Validation was carried out by specialists in Educational Administration and in Measurement and Evaluation Departments of the Delta State University. Reliability was confirmed through a test–retest procedure in which the questionnaire was administered twice to 20 teachers outside the study sample over a two-week interval. The Pearson Product-Moment correlation produced a coefficient of 0.81, indicating a strong positive relationship between the two sets of scores.

The instrument was a four point Likert -type scale ranging from 1.0 to 4.0, with; 1 = Strongly Disagree (similarly very low value); 2 = Disagree; 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Disagree (or similarly very high value). The total range is 4 – 1 = 3. The four equal interval can be obtained by ¾ = 0.75. Thus, intervals were created by adding 0.75. The interval ranges are as follows:

1.00 to 1.74, represents Strongly Disagree (Similarly very low value).
1.75 to 2.49 represents Disagree.
2.50 to 3.24 represents Agree.
32.25 to 4.00 represents Strongly Agree (or similarly very high value).

For the purpose of interpretation of the results, any mean score lower than 2.50 was considered disagree or low, and any mean score higher than 2.50 was taken as agree or high.

Descriptive statistics, including mean score and standard deviation, were used to address the research questions, while independent sample t-tests were employed to evaluate the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance.

Results

RQ1 What is the level of professional development among teachers in urban and rural public secondary schools in Delta State?

To answer this research question, data were collected on teachers' professional development across both urban and rural school settings. The responses were analyzed using mean and standard deviation.

Table 1: Mean Ratings and Standard Deviation of Teachers on Level of Professional Development by Location

Location	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	Remark
Urban	210	3.65	0.62	Very High
Rural	200	2.98	0.74	Moderate

Table 1 reveals that the mean professional development score for urban teachers was 3.65 (very high), whereas rural teachers recorded a mean score of 2.98 (moderate). This suggests that teachers in urban schools demonstrate a comparatively greater level of engagement in professional development activities than those in rural schools.

Ho1 There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of teachers in urban and rural public secondary schools in Delta State on the level of professional development.

To test this hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was employed.

Table 2: Independent Samples t-test on Teachers' Level of Professional Development by Location

Variable	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	df	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Urban Teachers	210	3.65	0.62	408	9.16	1.96	Reject H_o1
Rural Teachers	200	2.98	0.74				

The analysis indicates that the calculated t-value (9.16) exceeded the critical t-value (1.96) at the 0.05 significance level with 408 degrees of freedom. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected. This finding demonstrates a significant difference in the extent of professional development participation between urban and rural public secondary school teachers in Delta State, with urban teachers engaging in such activities to a markedly greater degree than their rural counterparts.

RQ2 What are the classroom management strategies adopted by teachers in urban and rural public secondary schools in Delta State?

Data relating to this research question were analyzed using mean and standard deviation.

Table 3: Mean Ratings and Standard Deviation of Teachers on Classroom Management Strategies by Location

Location	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	Remark
Urban	210	3.72	0.59	High
Rural	200	3.01	0.68	Moderate

Table 3 shows that urban teachers recorded a mean score of 3.72 (very high), whereas rural teachers had a mean score of 3.01 (moderate). This indicates that classroom management strategies are applied more frequently and effectively by teachers in urban schools compared to those in rural schools.

Ho2 There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of teachers in urban and rural public secondary schools in Delta State on the classroom management strategies they adopt.

Table 4: Independent Samples t-test on Classroom Management Strategies by Location

Variable	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	df	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Urban Teachers	210	3.72	0.59	408	10.23	1.96	Reject H_o2
Rural Teachers	200	3.01	0.68				

Table 4 indicates that the calculated t-value (10.23) was greater than the critical value of 1.96 at the 0.05 significance level. As a result, the null hypothesis was rejected, confirming a significant difference in the classroom management strategies employed by teachers in urban and rural public secondary schools in Delta State.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed significant disparities between teachers in urban and rural public secondary schools in Delta State in terms of both professional developments participated in and the classroom management strategies used. The results of Research Question 1 and Hypothesis 1 showed that urban teachers reported a higher level of professional development than their rural counterparts. This aligns with the findings of Onyekwelu (2024) and Adeyemi and Issa (2023), who noted that teachers in urban settings typically have greater access to training centres, workshops, digital tools, and government-sponsored in-service programmes due to better infrastructure and proximity to educational hubs.

The statistically significant difference observed between the two groups suggests that location continues to play a critical role in determining the accessibility and frequency of professional development for teachers. This supports Onah's (2025), findings that rural teachers often face logistical challenges, such as long travel distances, unstable internet access, and fewer institutional supports, which limit their participation in continuous learning opportunities. The implication of this finding is that while professional development is recognized as essential for teacher growth, its unequal distribution may reinforce existing educational inequities.

In line with the findings for Research Question 2 and Hypothesis 2, results showed that urban teachers employ classroom management strategies that are more effective and consistently applied compared to their rural counterparts. This aligns with the observations of Egborgo and Uroghome (2021), who highlighted the connection between ongoing professional training and improved classroom control. Teachers who engage in continuous professional development are better positioned to apply preventive, inclusive, and reflective behaviour management techniques, ultimately enhancing student engagement and academic achievement.

These results also reinforce the study's theoretical underpinning—the Vygotskian sociocultural learning theory—which stresses the role of tools, the learning environment, and social interaction in shaping educational outcomes. In this context, professional development functions as both a cultural and instructional tool that supports the growth of teacher competence, making them more knowledgeable than the students. However, in rural areas where access to such tools is limited, teachers are less likely to adopt innovative or research-driven classroom management practices (Warford, 2019). This highlights the urgent need for equitable, context-appropriate training initiatives by government to reduce the urban–rural gap.

Moreover, the findings highlight a policy concern. Despite the national push for inclusive education through mechanisms such as the Sustainable Development Goal 4, rural teachers are evidently underserved in critical areas of capacity building. As observed by Nwafor and Ogundele (2023), well-intentioned policies may fail to translate into impact if they are not tailored to the specific challenges of rural education contexts. Therefore, these disparities call for a decentralization of teacher development resources deliberately targeted to reach rural schools.

The results suggest that teachers in urban schools benefit from better access to training and, consequently, demonstrate greater proficiency in managing classrooms. The disparity calls for urgent policy attention and strategic investment in rural teacher development initiatives to ensure that no segment of the education system is left behind.

Conclusion

The study investigated the differences in professional development and classroom management strategies among teachers in urban and rural public secondary schools in Delta State. The findings revealed that urban teachers had significantly higher levels of professional development and adopted more effective classroom management strategies compared to their rural counterparts. These disparities are attributed to better access to training opportunities, educational infrastructure, and institutional support in urban areas.

The outcome of the study reinforces the understanding that teacher effectiveness is closely linked to access to professional development and behavioral management competence. When teachers are well-trained and supported, they are more likely to manage classrooms effectively, foster positive learning environments, and mitigate antisocial behaviors among students. Conversely, limited access to training—more prevalent in rural settings—can result in outdated or inadequate classroom practices, ultimately affecting the quality of education delivered.

It is, therefore, imperative that educational stakeholders and policymakers address the inequities in teacher development and support systems across locations. A more inclusive and balanced approach to professional development is essential for achieving equity in teacher performance and student learning outcomes in Delta State and beyond.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Delta State Ministry of Education should implement location-sensitive training programmes that specifically target rural schools, including mobile training units and community-based workshops.

2. Government and non-governmental organizations should prioritize funding for teacher development projects in rural areas, ensuring equitable access to resources, digital tools, and learning platforms.

3. Collaborations should be fostered between teacher training institutions and rural schools to facilitate regular mentoring, peer coaching, and experiential learning for teachers.

4. Education policies should incorporate mechanisms for tracking professional development equity across urban and rural locations. A data-driven approach to policy implementation can ensure that no teacher group is consistently underserved.

5. Schools should establish internal structures for evaluating the impact of professional development on classroom management, enabling real-time adjustments and support.

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