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Interpreting professional learning policy: Insights from Vietnam's primary school curriculum reform

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum reform is increasingly accompanied by heightened expectations for teacher professional learning (PL), positioning PL policy as a key mechanism through which reform is expected to influence classroom practice. However, research shows that PL policy is rarely implemented in linear or uniform ways; rather, it is actively interpreted and reshaped by teachers within specific institutional contexts. This study examines how primary school teachers in Vietnam make sense of PL expectations embedded in the national curriculum reform and how these interpretations shape their reported enactment in both school and classroom practice. Drawing on sense-making and policy enactment perspectives, the study adopts a qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews with ten primary school teachers from public schools in a highly centralised Vietnamese education system. The findings indicate that PL policy is experienced as ambiguous and multi-layered, requiring teachers to interpret and prioritise overlapping and sometimes competing policy signals. Teachers understand PL simultaneously as a mandated obligation linked to accountability and as an opportunity for professional growth, leading to selective enactment focused on practice-based and collaborative learning. Accountability pressures foster performative compliance centred on visibility and documentation, while contextual factors such as school leadership, workload, and system-level coherence mediate teachers' engagement. The study highlights teachers' sense-making as a key mediating process between PL policy and practice, demonstrating that teachers act as strategic policy enactors rather than passive implementers. The findings offer insights into the design of PL policies that better support meaningful curriculum reform, particularly in highly centralised education systems.

1. Introduction

Curriculum reform increasingly positions teacher professional learning (PL) as a key mechanism for translating policy into classroom practice (Poulton, 2020; Tran et al., 2023). However, research shows that PL policy is not enacted in linear or uniform ways; rather, it is interpreted and reshaped by teachers within specific institutional contexts (Ab Kadir, 2023; Tao & Gao, 2017).

Policy scholarship further highlights that PL policies often diverge from their original intent as they move across national, local, and school contexts (Riveros et al., 2012; Tao & Gao, 2017). Instead of simply implementing policy directives, teachers actively make sense of PL expectations in relation to their prior experiences, beliefs, working

conditions, and institutional constraints. As a result, the translation of PL policy into classroom practice is uneven and contingent, frequently producing gaps between reform rhetoric and everyday teaching realities (Brodie, 2021; Ha et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2023).

These dynamics are particularly pronounced in highly centralised education systems, where curriculum reform and PL are tightly controlled through top-down structures. In such contexts, teachers may face strong pressures to demonstrate compliance with mandated PL while exercising discretion in how policy messages influence their practice (Ha et al., 2021; Stillman, 2011; Tao & Gao, 2017; Truong et al., 2026). Understanding how teachers interpret and respond to PL policy is therefore critical for evaluating the outcomes of curriculum reform (McCarthy et al., 2025).

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Despite growing recognition of the importance of teacher professional learning (PL) in curriculum reform, existing research has focused predominantly on the design and effectiveness of PL programmes, with less attention paid to how PL policy is interpreted and enacted by teachers, particularly in highly centralised education systems. In such contexts, PL policy operates not only as a support mechanism but also as a governance tool, shaping both expectations and accountability. However, there remains limited empirical understanding of how teachers make sense of PL policy and how these interpretations shape enactment in practice.

This study contributes original insight by examining how Vietnamese primary school teachers interpret and enact PL policy during curriculum reform within a highly centralised education system, a context that remains under-examined in the international literature. Vietnam is a particularly salient case for this study because its highly centralised education system steers curriculum reform and teacher professional learning through strong, top-down policy directives and accountability expectations. This context makes visible the governance dimension of PL policy and helps explain why teachers may face pressure to demonstrate compliance with mandated learning while still exercising discretion in how policy messages are interpreted and enacted across different school conditions.

Conceptually, the study defines PL policy as a set of institutionalised expectations, requirements, and signals regarding teacher learning that are communicated through formal and informal policy channels. Drawing on sense-making and policy enactment perspectives, the study aims not only to describe teachers' experiences but also to explain how policy meanings are constructed and translated into practice. The study contributes to the literature by conceptualising PL policy as an interpretive and multi-layered policy signal, and by demonstrating how teachers act as selective policy enactors who prioritise and adapt policy expectations within contextual constraints.

The following section reviews relevant literature and develops the conceptual framework guiding this study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teachers in PL policy and enactment during curriculum reform

Curriculum reform is frequently accompanied by new expectations for teacher professional learning (PL), positioning teachers as key actors in translating policy intentions into classroom practice. In contemporary education systems, PL policy functions not merely as technical support, but as a central governance mechanism through which states seek to shape teaching quality, curricular coherence, and pedagogical change (Imants & Van derWal, 2020; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Tao & Gao, 2017; Tran et al., 2023; Vu et al., 2025). Research on curriculum reform demonstrates that such policies embed implicit assumptions about teachers' professional knowledge, motivation, and capacity for change (Fullan, 2007; Tao & Gao, 2017). As a result, PL expectations are often unevenly enacted across schools and may be interpreted and contested differently by teachers.

From a policy enactment perspective, PL policies are not implemented in a linear or uniform way. Ball et al. (2011) argue that policy is recontextualised as it travels across system levels, shaped by institutional histories, leadership practices, material resources, and accountability pressures. Within this frame, PL policy operates dually as a developmental and regulatory tool: it seeks to build teacher capacity while also monitoring alignment with reform objectives. During periods of large-scale curriculum change, this dual function often intensifies, increasing demands on teachers to demonstrate compliance alongside pedagogical adaptation.

International research indicates that when PL is structured primarily through mandates, standards, or centrally prescribed programmes, tensions frequently emerge between policy intentions and teachers' working realities (Ball et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Tao

& Gao, 2017). PL may be experienced as fragmented, overloaded, or weakly connected to classroom practice, particularly under compressed reform timelines (Allen & Heredia, 2021). These tensions highlight the limitations of policy design alone and emphasise the need for closer analysis of how PL policies are interpreted and enacted by teachers in schools.

2.2. Teachers as policy interpreters and sense-makers

While policy enactment theory highlights the structural and institutional conditions shaping PL implementation, sense-making theory offers a complementary lens for understanding how teachers interpret and respond to PL policy at the level of professional practice. Weick (1995) conceptualises sense-making as an ongoing social process through which individuals interpret ambiguity and change. Applied to education policy, sense-making theory challenges assumptions that policy messages are transferred directly from official texts to classrooms. Instead, teachers actively construct meaning as they engage with policy signals, drawing on prior experience, beliefs, and professional knowledge (Allen & Penuel, 2015; Spillane et al., 2002).

Empirical studies suggest that teachers' interpretations of PL policy are shaped by professional identity, subject expertise, career stage, and emotional investment in teaching (Tao & Gao, 2017). When confronted with new PL requirements during curriculum reform, teachers assess whether these expectations align with existing pedagogical commitments and whether they are feasible within local contexts. Consequently, the same PL policy may be experienced as an opportunity for professional growth by some teachers, while being viewed as administratively burdensome or performative by others (Coburn, 2001).

Policy enactment theory further situates these interpretive processes within wider organisational and material contexts. Ball et al. (2011) emphasise that teachers' sense-making is constrained and enabled by leadership practices, time allocation, resource availability, and accountability structures. From this perspective, teachers' engagement with PL policy involves strategic actions such as selective compliance, and reinterpretation. Examining these sense-making and enactment processes is therefore essential for understanding how PL expectations associated with curriculum reform are translated—often unevenly—into classroom practice.

2.3. PL as situated and contextual practice

Existing literature increasingly conceptualises PL as a situated, social, and ongoing process rather than a discrete set of training events (Webster-Wright, 2009). Effective PL is associated with alignment with curriculum goals, opportunities for collaboration, sustained engagement over time, and direct relevance to teachers' instructional contexts (Desimone, 2009; Fairman et al., 2022; Lynch et al., 2024; Patfield et al., 2023; Pham et al., 2023; Timperley, 2011; Truong et al., 2025). However, when PL is primarily organised through policy mandates, PL can be experienced by teachers as externally imposed and disconnected from their professional needs (Keay et al., 2019).

Research across diverse education systems highlights a distinction between formal, policy-mandated PL and informal, practice-based learning embedded in teachers' daily work. Teachers often value collaborative activities such as peer discussion, lesson study, and classroom experimentation more highly than one-off workshops or cascaded training models (Nguyen et al., 2022; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Pham et al., 2024; Timperley et al., 2008). This distinction underscores teacher agency in prioritising certain forms of learning over others, even when formal policy requirements must still be met (Priestley et al., 2015; Robinson, 2012; Tao & Gao, 2017).

In the context of curriculum reform, this selective engagement with PL can shape how reform ideas are enacted in practice. Teachers may comply with required PL activities for accountability purposes while relying on informal networks and practice-based learning to develop

practical strategies for teaching new curriculum content. Examining how teachers navigate these multiple forms of PL provides insight into the relationship between policy expectations and pedagogical change.

2.4. PL policy in centralised education systems

In highly centralised education systems, PL policy is often tightly coupled with national reform agendas and mechanisms of state control. Studies from East and Southeast Asian contexts suggest that PL is frequently delivered through top-down structures, with limited opportunities for teacher input into content or design (Ng & Tan, 2009; Nguyen et al., 2025; Pham et al., 2025; Saito, 2012). Cultural norms related to hierarchy, respect for authority, and collective responsibility further shape teachers' responses to policy expectations (Chen, 2020; Tao & Gao, 2017).

Within such systems, teachers' interpretations are influenced not only by policy texts but also by expectations from school leaders, inspectors, and local education authorities (Liu et al., 2016). Accountability mechanisms may prioritise visible indicators of compliance—such as attendance records, certificates, or documentation—over evidence of instructional change. As a result, teachers may focus on fulfilling procedural requirements while exercising discretion in how, or whether, policy messages influence their classroom practice (M. Kennedy, 2014).

These dynamics are particularly relevant for understanding PL during curriculum reform, where teachers are required to engage with new pedagogical approaches while operating within tightly regulated systems. Investigating how teachers interpret and navigate PL policy in such contexts can illuminate the gap between reform rhetoric and everyday teaching practice.

2.5. Conceptual framework linking policy, sense-making, and practice

Drawing on sense-making and policy enactment theories, this study conceptualises PL policy as a set of signals that teachers actively interpret within specific institutional and cultural contexts (Ball et al., 2011; Coburn, 2005). The conceptual framework positions teachers at the centre of the reform process, mediating between policy expectations and classroom practice. PL policy is understood as shaping, but not determining, teachers' actions.

Within this framework, teachers' interpretations of PL expectations are influenced by three interacting dimensions: individual factors (such as beliefs, experience, and professional identity), school-level conditions (including leadership, collegial support, and resources), and system-level pressures (such as accountability mechanisms and reform timelines) (Allen & Penuel, 2015; Pinar et al., 2021; Prenger et al., 2017). These interpretations inform how teachers prioritise, adapt, and respond to PL requirements.

This framework directly informs the study's research questions by guiding analysis of: (1) how primary school teachers understand the PL expectations embedded in Vietnam's new curriculum; (2) how teachers make sense of these expectations within their professional and institutional contexts; and (3) how PL requirements are translated into classroom practice. By linking policy, sense-making, and enactment, the framework enables a nuanced examination of curriculum reform as an interpretive and socially situated process. Taken together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive lens for examining how policy is interpreted and enacted across multiple levels of the education system.

The study seeks to address the following research questions.

RQ1. How do Vietnamese primary school teachers interpret the PL expectations embedded in the national curriculum reform policy?

RQ2. How does teachers' sense-making of PL policy translate into specific enactment practices in schools and classrooms during curriculum reform?

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

This is an explanatory qualitative study. We use sense-making and policy enactment frameworks to interpret how teachers understand PL policy expectations and why enactment varies across school contexts. Our goal is not to test a theory but to extend these frameworks to a centralised reform context. The study focused on teachers' subjective understandings, interpretations, and everyday responses to policy expectations. Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of PL initiatives, the research examines how policy meanings are constructed and negotiated within specific institutional and cultural contexts. A qualitative approach was therefore appropriate, as it enabled in-depth investigation of teachers' experiences and meaning-making processes that are not easily captured quantitatively.

The study focuses on teachers' self-reported interpretations and accounts of practice, rather than direct observation of classroom enactment. The use of qualitative interview data allows for a detailed understanding of teachers' reasoning and experiences.

3.2. Research context

The study was conducted in five public primary schools in a province in Central Vietnam. The province was selected based on accessibility and its active implementation of the national curriculum reform, making it a relevant context for examining teachers' engagement with new PL policy requirements. Vietnam's education system is highly centralised, with curriculum and PL policies developed at the national level and disseminated through provincial and district education authorities.

At the time of the study, primary schools were implementing a new national curriculum introducing revised pedagogical approaches alongside new PL expectations. Teachers were required to participate in mandated PL activities, including centrally organised training sessions and school-based initiatives. This context provided a suitable setting for examining how PL policy is interpreted and enacted at the school and classroom levels.

3.3. Participants and sampling

Schools were initially identified through existing professional networks and accessibility considerations within the selected province. School leaders were first contacted to obtain institutional permission, after which teachers were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. The participants consisted of ten primary school teachers from five public primary schools within the selected province (see Table 1).

Purposive sampling was used to recruit teachers who met the following criteria: (1) active involvement in implementing the new curriculum, (2) participation in PL activities related to the reform, and (3) variation in teaching experience and qualifications to capture diverse perspectives. The sample included teachers with a range of teaching experience, enabling diversity in perspectives on PL and policy

Table 1
Participants.

No	Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Years of Teaching Experience
1	Ms An	Female	12
2	Ms Chuong	Female	9
3	Ms Mai	Female	7
4	Ms Ngan	Female	20
5	Mr Quyet	Male	14
6	Ms Thuy	Female	4
7	Ms Thanh	Female	16
8	Mr Tuan	Male	12
9	Ms Tuyet	Female	8
10	Ms Yen	Female	11

interpretation.

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and identifying information related to schools and individuals was removed from the dataset. The participants were not intended to be representative of the national teaching population. Rather, consistent with qualitative inquiry, the sample was selected to provide in-depth, contextually grounded insights into teachers' interpretations and enactment of PL policy.

The sample size is consistent with qualitative research aimed at generating in-depth, contextually grounded insights rather than statistical generalisation. The use of purposive sampling enabled the selection of information-rich cases relevant to the research questions, supporting analytical depth and variation in perspectives.

3.4. Data collection

Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews, enabling consistency across participants while allowing flexibility to probe issues raised by individual teachers. This method was particularly suited to examining sense-making, as it allows participants to articulate their understanding of policy expectations, reflect on their experiences, and describe how PL influences their practice. Interview questions are provided in [Appendix A](#) to enhance transparency and reproducibility.

The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to enable participants to express their views in detail and with nuance. They took place either at participants' schools (six) or online (four), depending on availability and preference. Each interview lasted from 46 to 58 min and was guided by 12 core questions, with additional probing questions used to explore participants' responses in greater depth. All of the ten interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim. Quotes used in this manuscript were translated into English by our research team.

The interview questions were developed through an iterative process informed by the study's conceptual framework, research questions, and relevant literature on PL, sense-making, and policy enactment. Rather than focusing solely on teachers' participation in PL activities, the interview guide was designed to elicit teachers' interpretations, perceptions, and underlying reasoning. This approach aligned with sense-making theory, which emphasises how individuals construct meaning in response to policy signals and contextual conditions.

Initial questions focused on teachers' understandings of the new curriculum and associated PL expectations (e.g., how they perceived the purposes and priorities of PL under the reform). Follow-up questions explored how teachers experienced mandated PL activities, including centrally organised training and school-based initiatives. Teachers were also asked to describe how PL related to their classroom practice and whether they perceived alignment or tension between policy expectations and everyday teaching realities.

To capture the contextual dimensions of policy enactment, the interview guide included questions about school leadership, collegial support, workload, and accountability pressures. Probing questions were used to encourage participants to provide concrete examples of how PL requirements were enacted in practice, as well as to reflect on challenges, adaptations, or strategies they employed in response to policy demands. The guide remained flexible, allowing the researcher to pursue emerging themes and clarify meanings during the interviews.

The interview questions were reviewed and refined by the researchers individually and then as a group prior to data collection to ensure clarity and relevance. Minor amendments were made after the initial interviews to improve question sequencing and to allow greater depth in exploring teachers' sense-making processes.

3.5. Data analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following six-

phase framework of (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As this study adopts a qualitative design, no statistical analysis was conducted; instead, analysis focused on interpreting patterns of meaning across participants' accounts. First, all Vietnamese transcripts were read repeatedly alongside listening to the audio recordings where needed to ensure accuracy and build familiarity. During this phase, the researcher wrote brief margin notes capturing early impressions and potential analytic patterns (for example, where participants framed PL as "requirements" rather than "learning", or where they described tensions between mandated PL and classroom realities).

Second, initial codes were generated inductively from the data through line-by-line coding, focusing on features of the data relevant to teachers' interpretations of PL policy, their sense-making processes, and their reported enactment. No pre-established coding framework was imposed; instead, codes emerged through close engagement with participants' accounts, while being informed by sensitising concepts from the literature (e.g. sense-making, policy enactment).

Codes were refined and finalised through an iterative process involving repeated comparison within and across transcripts. Decisions to merge, split, or discard codes were guided by two key criteria: (1) conceptual coherence (the extent to which coded data captured a consistent underlying idea), and (2) relevance to the research questions. Where overlap was identified, codes were consolidated or differentiated based on analytical focus. This iterative refinement process was documented through the evolving codebook and analytic memos, ensuring transparency in how final themes were constructed.

Codes were kept close to participants' language where possible and applied inclusively (that is, coding the full segment needed to preserve meaning rather than isolated phrases). The codebook documented labels, definitions, and exemplar excerpts, while analytic memos captured emerging patterns, uncertainties, and reflexive considerations (see [Appendix B](#)).

Third, codes were reviewed and clustered into candidate themes by examining how codes related to one another and to the research questions. For example, codes capturing PL as mandated compliance (for example, "attendance as evidence", "paperwork proof", "certificate chasing") were grouped with codes about accountability pressures (for example, "inspection anxiety", "reporting to leaders") to form a broader candidate theme about PL as governance and compliance.

Fourth, themes were iteratively refined through constant comparison within and across interviews, checking (a) internal coherence (do the coded extracts within a theme 'hang together'?) and (b) external distinction (is this theme meaningfully different from other themes?). Where overlap occurred, themes were split (e.g., separating "policy clarity" from "policy overload") or merged (e.g., combining "peer learning" and "informal sharing" into a single sub-theme) to enhance clarity.

Fifth, themes were defined and named in a way that captured the central organising concept of each theme and its relationship to PL policy interpretation and enactment. Finally, the write-up selected illustrative extracts that best represented the range of views across participants and explicitly linked each theme back to the study purpose and research questions, while acknowledging the interpretive nature and interview-based scope of the findings.

3.6. Trustworthiness and reflexivity

To enhance credibility, the study employed prolonged engagement with the data through repeated reading and iterative coding, alongside regular discussions within the research team to refine interpretations. Trustworthiness and dependability were supported through systematic documentation of coding decisions, analytic memos, and the evolving codebook, providing a clear audit trail that enhances transparency in theme development.

Given that interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and translated into English, particular attention was paid to preserving meaning during

translation, with transcripts and translated excerpts reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy. Reflexivity was also considered, as the researchers’ familiarity with the Vietnamese education system may have shaped interpretation; this was addressed through ongoing critical reflection throughout analysis.

The following section presents the findings, organised around key themes emerging from the data.

4. Results

This section reports findings from an inductive thematic analysis of interviews with primary school teachers implementing Vietnam’s new curriculum. Drawing on sense-making and policy enactment perspectives, it addresses two questions: how teachers interpret PL policy and how these interpretations shape enactment in school and classroom practice. Rather than treating interpretation and enactment as separate stages, the analysis highlights their close interconnection in teachers’ accounts. As the data rely on self-reports, the findings should be understood as interpretations of practice rather than direct observations of classroom enactment.

The findings show that PL policy functions less as a fixed set of directives and more as a set of signals that teachers actively interpret and adapt. Five interrelated themes emerged (summarised in Table 2), illustrating how teachers’ sense-making mediates between policy

expectations and professional action during curriculum reform.

4.1. PL policy as ambiguous and multi-layered

Teachers consistently described PL expectations associated with the new curriculum as broad, abstract, and open to interpretation. While participants were generally aware that the reform required them to “update,” “innovate,” and “develop professionally,” many noted that policy messages lacked specificity regarding how these expectations should be realised in practice. As a result, PL policy was experienced not as a single coherent directive but as a set of overlapping, sometimes ambiguous signals conveyed through multiple channels.

Teachers reported receiving PL expectations through official curriculum documents, training sessions organised by education authorities, school-level meetings, and informal communication from school leaders. However, these messages were often perceived as emphasising general principles rather than offering concrete guidance. Ms Chuong, for example, explained:

Policy documents and training programs place strong emphasis on innovation, the development of students’ competencies, and ongoing PL; however, they do not clearly specify how teachers are expected to learn, nor what level of learning is considered sufficient.

This ambiguity required teachers to interpret what PL policy meant for their daily work. Rather than following a clearly prescribed pathway, teachers described inferring priorities from fragmented policy signals. Ms Thanh noted:

Each level communicates differently. At the higher levels, the orientations are articulated very well, but at the school level there is a need for flexibility. Ultimately, teachers are left to interpret for themselves what is most important

From a policy enactment perspective, these findings highlight how PL policy is recontextualised as it moves from national to school levels. Teachers did not experience policy as a stable set of instructions but as an interpretive space requiring judgment and negotiation.

These accounts suggest that PL policy created an interpretive demand on teachers, rather than providing operational clarity.

4.2. Making sense of PL as obligation and opportunity

Teachers’ interpretations of PL policy reflected a dual sense-making process in which PL was understood simultaneously as a mandated obligation and as a potential opportunity for professional growth. This duality shaped both teachers’ orientation toward PL and the forms of engagement they prioritised.

4.2.1. PL as policy obligation

Many teachers described PL primarily as something they were required to do as part of curriculum reform. Attendance at training sessions, participation in school-based activities, and completion of documentation were widely understood as non-negotiable expectations. Ms Thuy commented:

PL is mandatory. When training sessions or required professional activities are organized, teachers are expected to participate fully, as this is part of their responsibility in implementing the new curriculum.

This obligation-oriented interpretation was closely tied to accountability structures. Teachers were aware that participation in PL was monitored through attendance records, reports, and certificates. As a result, PL policy was often associated with compliance rather than intrinsic motivation. Ms Mai explained:

Table 2
Summary of key themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-themes	Brief description
1. PL policy as ambiguous and multi-layered	- Broad and abstract policy messages - Overlapping signals across system levels	Teachers experienced PL expectations as unclear and layered, communicated through multiple channels (policy documents, training, school directives) with limited operational guidance, requiring interpretation and judgment.
2. Making sense of PL as obligation and opportunity	- PL as mandated obligation - PL as opportunity for professional growth	Teachers interpreted PL simultaneously as a compulsory requirement tied to accountability and as a potential source of professional learning, negotiating these meanings in their engagement with reform.
3. Selective enactment of PL through practice-based learning	- Prioritising school-based and collaborative PL - Filtering PL through classroom realities	Rather than enacting all PL requirements uniformly, teachers strategically prioritised practice-relevant, collaborative learning and selectively engaged with policy expectations based on feasibility and perceived impact.
4. Performative compliance and visibility	- Documentation and evidence as compliance - Tensions between form and substance	Accountability pressures encouraged enactment focused on visible indicators (attendance, reports, certificates), at times displacing deeper pedagogical engagement with PL.
5. Contextual conditions shaping interpretation and enactment	- School leadership mediation - Time and workload pressures - System-level coherence and fragmentation	Teachers’ sense-making and enactment of PL policy were shaped by leadership practices, workload constraints, and inconsistencies across policy levels, enabling or constraining meaningful engagement.

I know that if I do not participate fully, I will be reprimanded and it will affect my end-of-year evaluation. Therefore, regardless of whether I find it relevant or not, I still have to take part.

4.2.2. PL as opportunity for professional growth

At the same time, teachers did not reduce PL policy solely to compliance. Many participants described actively seeking to extract professional value from mandated activities, reframing them as opportunities to improve their practice. Mr Tuan articulated this interpretive shift:

Although the training is mandatory, if I am able to be selective and relate it to my own classroom practice, I can still learn many useful things.

Teachers' accounts indicate that obligation and opportunity were not mutually exclusive but negotiated together in everyday practice.

4.3. Selective enactment of PL policy through practice-based learning

A key finding across interviews was that teachers did not enact PL policy in a uniform or comprehensive manner. Instead, they selectively enacted policy expectations by prioritising forms of learning they perceived as most relevant to classroom practice. This selectivity reflects teachers' strategic responses to workload pressures and reform demands.

4.3.1. Prioritising school-based and collaborative learning

Teachers consistently reported that, while they formally participated in centrally organised training, they relied most heavily on school-based PL to support curriculum implementation. Activities such as lesson study, peer observation, and professional discussions within teaching teams were perceived as more directly aligned with classroom realities.

Ms Ngan explained:

Centralized training helps me understand the overall direction, but to actually teach effectively, learning comes primarily from subject-group professional meetings, classroom observations, and exchanges with colleagues.

Through these activities, teachers translated abstract policy expectations into concrete pedagogical practices. Collaborative learning allowed teachers to collectively interpret policy messages and adapt them to local contexts. Mr Quyet noted:

Within the subject group, we collectively discuss how the requirements of the new curriculum can be adapted to suit our students.

4.3.2. Filtering policy messages through classroom realities

Teachers described filtering PL policy messages based on their perceived feasibility and relevance. Rather than attempting to implement all reform-related recommendations, teachers focused on aspects they believed would have the greatest impact on student learning.

Ms Tuyet reflected:

The new curriculum places many demands, but not everything can be implemented immediately. Teachers need to prioritise what is appropriate for their own classes first, and then gradually expand from there.

This selective interpretation directly shaped enactment, as teachers prioritised practice-based and collaborative learning while adapting or disregarding less relevant requirements.

4.4. Compliance, visibility, and performative dimensions of PL

Teachers' accounts revealed a strong performative dimension to PL policy enactment. Participation in PL was not only about developing

professional capacity but also about demonstrating visible compliance with reform expectations. Teachers' understanding of PL as a monitored and accountable requirement shaped how policy was enacted in practice, often directing attention toward activities that could be formally evidenced.

4.4.1. Performing compliance through participation and documentation

Teachers frequently referred to the importance of having complete documentation, having sufficient evidence, and full participation when discussing PL. These expressions illustrate how PL policy was enacted through visible and measurable indicators of compliance. Ms Yen explained:

What matters is having complete paperwork—reports and photographic records of professional activities. These serve as evidence that the required expectations have been properly fulfilled.

This emphasis on documentation shaped how teachers allocated their time and energy. In some cases, teachers described prioritising activities that were easily documented over those that were less visible but potentially more meaningful. In this way, teachers' sense-making of PL as an accountability-driven requirement led to enactment practices focused on visibility, documentation, and procedural compliance.

4.4.2. Tensions between visible compliance and meaningful learning

Teachers expressed ambivalence about the performative aspects of PL. While acknowledging the necessity of compliance, many noted that documentation requirements sometimes overshadowed substantive learning.

Ms Ngan commented:

At times, I feel that more effort is devoted to completing documentation than to engaging in genuine learning. PL then becomes more about form than substance.

These tensions reflect broader policy enactment dynamics in which accountability mechanisms shape how PL is experienced and enacted. Teachers' awareness of this tension further influenced enactment, as they navigated between fulfilling visible policy requirements and seeking more meaningful, practice-relevant learning opportunities.

4.5. Contextual conditions shaping policy interpretation and enactment

Teachers consistently emphasised that their interpretations and enactment of PL policy were shaped by contextual conditions at the school and system levels. These conditions functioned as both enabling and constraining factors, influencing how policy expectations were translated into practice.

4.5.1. School leadership as a mediating force

School leadership played a crucial role in mediating PL policy. Teachers described principals and school leaders as key interpreters of policy who influenced how expectations were prioritised and enacted.

In schools where leaders framed PL as developmental and supportive, teachers reported greater engagement and willingness to experiment. Ms An explained:

School leadership not only requires compliance but also creates conditions for teachers to exchange ideas and experiment with new teaching approaches. This helps teachers feel more confident when implementing the curriculum.

Conversely, when leadership emphasised compliance and inspection, teachers were more likely to approach PL defensively. Ms Mai noted:

If school leaders focus solely on checking documentation, teachers will comply with the requirements but will be reluctant to try new approaches.

4.5.2. Time, workload, and reform pressure

Time constraints and heavy workloads were repeatedly cited as major barriers to meaningful engagement with PL policy. Teachers described feeling overwhelmed by the simultaneous demands of teaching, administrative tasks, and curriculum reform.

Ms Tuyet stated:

Time is the greatest challenge. Balancing teaching responsibilities, documentation requirements, and mandated PL generates considerable pressure.

Under these conditions, teachers often adopted pragmatic strategies, such as focusing on minimal compliance or integrating PL into existing activities.

4.5.3. System-level coherence and fragmentation

Teachers also pointed to inconsistencies across system levels as influencing their sense-making of PL policy. While policy intentions were generally perceived as positive, fragmentation in implementation created confusion and reduced coherence.

Ms Thanh, an experienced teacher, explained:

Although the policy intentions are sound, implementation varies across levels, which leaves teachers uncertain about which priorities to follow.

These findings underscore the importance of examining PL policy not only as a formal text but as a lived and negotiated process shaped by multiple contextual forces.

Taken together, the findings address RQ2 by demonstrating how teachers' sense-making processes actively shape the enactment of PL policy in school and classroom practice. Teachers' sense-making mediates which aspects of policy are taken up, how they are prioritised, and where meaningful learning occurs. Interpreting PL simultaneously as a mandated obligation and a professional opportunity, teachers enact policy through hybrid strategies that combine performative compliance with selective, practice-based learning. Rather than implementing PL requirements comprehensively, teachers filter policy signals through classroom realities, workload constraints, and local collegial support, privileging school-based collaboration as the primary site of instructional change. Accountability pressures further steer enactment toward visible indicators of compliance, while leadership practices and system coherence condition whether PL is experienced as developmental or

procedural.

These findings are further interpreted and situated within the broader literature in the following discussion.

5. Discussion

This study investigates how Vietnamese primary school teachers understand and implement professional learning (PL) policy amid national curriculum reform. Using sense-making and policy enactment perspectives, the findings reveal the nuanced interpretive processes teachers engage in as they respond to unclear policy directives, accountability demands, and the realities of classroom practice (see Fig. 1). Fig. 1 illustrates how professional learning (PL) policy operates as a set of signals that are interpreted through teachers' sense-making processes and translated into enactment practices, shaped by contextual conditions such as leadership, workload, and system coherence.

Based on teachers' reported experiences and descriptions of practice in interviews, PL policy is shown not as a simple instrument for capacity building, but as a layered form of governance that both supports and limits teachers while reshaping their work. The discussion situates these findings within existing scholarship, highlighting theoretical contributions, insights from Vietnam's centralised education system, and implications for curriculum reform and PL policy design.

The study makes several key contributions. Empirically, it sheds light on PL policy enactment in a largely under-examined, centralised context. By analysing teachers' accounts of how they engage with PL requirements, it provides insight into how enactment is interpreted and negotiated by those directly responsible for implementation. Theoretically, it brings together sense-making and policy enactment approaches to frame PL policy as an interpretive practice. Methodologically, it offers rich qualitative evidence of how teachers engage with policy in everyday settings. Practically, it suggests directions for developing PL policies that are more responsive to teachers' professional contexts.

5.1. PL policy as interpretive space rather than directive

A central contribution of this study is its demonstration that PL policy operates as an interpretive space rather than a clearly bounded set of instructions. Teachers consistently experienced PL expectations as broad, abstract, and layered across multiple policy channels, requiring them to infer priorities and meanings. These interpretations, as reported

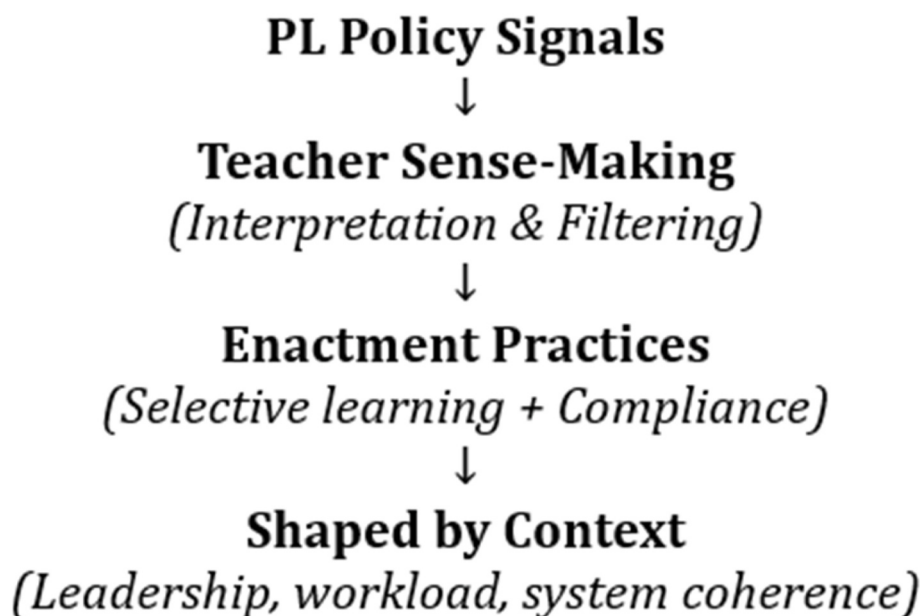


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of PL policy enactment.

by teachers, illustrate how policy intentions are translated into locally meaningful understandings rather than enacted as fixed scripts. This finding aligns with policy enactment scholarship that challenges linear models of implementation and emphasises the recontextualisation of policy as it moves across system levels (Ball et al., 2011; Riveros et al., 2012; Tao & Gao, 2017). In the Vietnamese context, although curriculum reform is centrally designed, its associated PL expectations are not experienced as uniform or stable. Instead, they are mediated through provincial training programmes, school leadership practices, and local institutional cultures (Nguyen et al., 2023). Teachers' reported sense-making highlights how enactment is shaped by interpretation rather than by direct policy transmission.

This ambiguity has important implications. On one hand, it creates space for teacher agency, allowing educators to adapt PL to their classroom contexts. On the other hand, it places a significant interpretive burden on teachers, particularly in a system where hierarchical norms and accountability pressures remain strong. The findings thus complicate assumptions that centralisation necessarily produces clarity and coherence. Even within tightly regulated systems, policy meaning is negotiated rather than transmitted intact (Tao & Gao, 2017).

5.2. Obligation, opportunity, and the dual nature of PL

Teachers' sense-making of PL as both obligation and opportunity reflects a dual logic embedded within PL policy. Consistent with international research, mandated PL was closely associated with compliance, monitoring, and evaluation (A. Kennedy, 2014). Attendance records, certificates, and documentation functioned as key indicators of accountability, reinforcing a view of PL as a requirement rather than a choice (Stillman, 2011). This obligation-oriented interpretation was particularly salient given the high-stakes nature of curriculum reform and its linkage to performance appraisal.

At the same time, teachers did not position themselves solely as passive recipients of policy mandates. In their accounts of practice, many actively reframed required PL as an opportunity for growth, selectively engaging with content perceived as relevant to their teaching. This finding resonates with sense-making theory, which emphasises that individuals construct meaning by filtering policy signals through their existing beliefs, experiences, and goals (Ball et al., 2011; Spillane et al., 2002). Teachers' ability to hold these dual interpretations simultaneously—complying outwardly while seeking intrinsic professional value—illustrates the nuanced forms of agency evident in interview narratives (Priestley et al., 2015; Robinson, 2012).

Importantly, this duality suggests that the effectiveness of PL policy cannot be assessed solely through participation metrics. While compliance may be high, the depth and direction of learning depend on how teachers interpret the purposes of PL and its relevance to their practice.

5.3. Selective enactment and the privileging of practice-based learning

The findings further demonstrate that teachers enact PL policy selectively, prioritising forms of learning that are situated, collaborative, and closely connected to classroom practice. Teachers' descriptions of enactment practices indicate that while centrally organised training was recognised as useful for understanding reform orientations, it was school-based PL—such as lesson study, peer discussion, and subject-group collaboration—that was regarded as most meaningful (Pham et al., 2024). This pattern mirrors international evidence that teachers value sustained, practice-focused PL over one-off workshops or cascaded training models (Desimone, 2009; Timperley, 2011).

From a policy enactment perspective, selective enactment is not a sign of resistance or failure but a rational response to competing demands, limited time, and heavy workloads (Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2010). Teachers filtered policy messages based on feasibility and impact, focusing on what could realistically be implemented in their classrooms. These reported enactment strategies underscore the

importance of recognising teachers as active policy enactors who make strategic decisions about where to invest their professional energy.

However, selective enactment also carries risks. When teachers prioritise locally meaningful learning over centrally prescribed priorities, variations in curriculum implementation may widen across schools and classrooms. This tension between local adaptation and system-wide coherence is a recurring challenge in curriculum reform and highlights the need for PL policies that balance guidance with flexibility (Ball et al., 2012).

5.4. Performative compliance and the visibility of PL

One of the most salient findings concerns the performative dimensions of PL policy enactment. Teachers' accounts revealed a strong emphasis on visible indicators of compliance, particularly documentation and evidence of participation. This aligns with broader critiques of performativity in education policy, where professional practices are shaped by what can be audited and made visible rather than by pedagogical effectiveness (Ball, 2003; McCarthy et al., 2025; Power, 1997).

In the Vietnamese context, the emphasis on documentation reflects system-level accountability mechanisms that prioritise procedural adherence. Teachers reported situations in which completing reports or photographic evidence took precedence over deeper engagement with learning content. While such practices ensure policy visibility and traceability, they risk reducing PL to a symbolic activity detached from instructional improvement (Ball, 2003).

At the same time, teachers' ambivalence toward performative compliance suggests awareness of this tension. Many recognised the limitations of documentation-driven PL and expressed a desire for more substantive engagement. This finding reinforces the argument that accountability mechanisms profoundly shape how PL is experienced and enacted, often in unintended ways.

5.5. Contextual mediation: leadership, time, and system coherence

In relation to RQ2, the findings show that teachers' sense-making does not merely influence attitudes toward PL but actively shapes the forms of enactment observed in schools and classrooms, including selective engagement, prioritisation of collaborative learning, and performative compliance under accountability pressures.

The study highlights the critical role of contextual conditions in shaping teachers' interpretations and enactment of PL policy. School leadership emerged as a key mediating force, influencing whether PL was framed as developmental or primarily compliance-oriented (Lynch et al., 2024). Where leaders created supportive environments for collaboration and experimentation, teachers reported greater confidence and engagement. Conversely, leadership practices focused on inspection and checking encouraged more defensive forms of compliance.

Time constraints and workload pressures further constrained meaningful engagement with PL (Nguyen et al., 2023). Teachers' pragmatic strategies—such as integrating PL into existing activities or focusing on minimal compliance—reflect the realities of sustained reform demands. These findings echo international concerns about reform overload and the limits of teacher capacity to absorb continuous change (Fullan, 2016).

Finally, teachers' perceptions of fragmentation across system levels point to challenges of coherence in centrally driven reform (Patfield et al., 2023). While policy intentions were generally viewed positively, inconsistent messaging and uneven implementation undermined clarity. This finding emphasises the need for stronger alignment between curriculum goals, PL design, and accountability structures.

This study has several key strengths. First, it provides in-depth empirical insight into teachers' interpretations of PL policy during curriculum reform. Second, it examines these processes within a highly centralised education system, offering context-specific insights that

remain underrepresented in the literature. Third, the study integrates sense-making and policy enactment perspectives to provide a more comprehensive analytical framework. Finally, the use of rich qualitative interview data enables a nuanced account of how teachers interpret and respond to policy in their everyday professional contexts.

5.6. Implications for PL policy and curriculum reform

Taken together, the findings suggest several implications. First, PL policy should be designed with explicit recognition of teachers as sense-makers rather than passive implementers. Greater clarity around purposes, priorities, and expectations—combined with space for contextual adaptation—may ease the interpretive burden while preserving professional agency. Second, policymakers should attend to the balance between accountability and learning, ensuring that documentation requirements do not overshadow substantive pedagogical engagement. Third, strengthening school-based, collaborative PL can serve as a more effective bridge between curriculum reform and classroom practice, particularly in centralised systems.

6. Limitations

Despite the contributions discussed above, the study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small and limited to ten primary school teachers from public schools in a single province in Vietnam. Whilst this enabled a detailed examination of teachers' sense-making processes, the findings are not intended to be generalisable to all Vietnamese primary teachers or other educational contexts. Second, the study relied solely on self-reported interview data. Although interviews are well suited to examining interpretations and experiences, they may not fully capture how PL policy is enacted in classroom practice, or how these interpretations translate into actual enactment. Observational data or document analysis could offer additional insights into the relationship between reported interpretations and actual practice.

Third, the study focused exclusively on teachers' perspectives and did not include views from other stakeholders such as school leaders, policymakers, or PL providers, whose perspectives may offer a more complete picture of teachers' PL policy interpretations and enactment. Finally, as the research was conducted during an ongoing curriculum reform, teachers' interpretations may evolve over time. Longitudinal research would therefore be valuable for examining how sense-making and enactment develop as reforms become more established.

7. Conclusion

While the findings provide insight into how teachers describe and interpret their engagement with PL policy, they are based on self-reported data and do not directly capture classroom practice. Therefore, conclusions regarding enactment should be interpreted cautiously, as reflecting teachers' reported understandings and accounts of practice rather than direct observations.

Teachers' sense-making operates as the key mediating mechanism between PL policy texts and classroom practice, shaping enactment through selective prioritisation, contextual adaptation, and strategic compliance. As articulated in teachers' accounts, sense-making influences how PL expectations are filtered, interpreted, and enacted within everyday professional work.

This study highlights the central role of teachers' sense-making in shaping how PL policy is interpreted and enacted during Vietnam's primary school curriculum reform. Rather than functioning as a clear, technical mechanism for capacity building, PL policy operates as a complex, layered set of signals that teachers must actively interpret within demanding institutional and cultural contexts. Teachers' reported experiences illustrate that they are not passive recipients of reform but active policy enactors who navigate ambiguity, accountability

pressures, and practical constraints to sustain their everyday teaching.

By revealing how PL is understood simultaneously as obligation and opportunity, this study underscores the limitations of policy approaches that equate participation with meaningful learning. Teachers' selective enactment of PL—particularly their prioritisation of collaborative, practice-based activities—suggests that professional growth is most likely to occur when policy expectations align with classroom realities. At the same time, the prominence of performative compliance and documentation requirements in teachers' accounts illustrates how accountability structures can shift PL toward visibility rather than instructional improvement.

Overall, the study contributes empirical insight into PL policy enactment within a highly centralised education system, extending sense-making and policy enactment theories to the Vietnamese context. The findings suggest that for curriculum reform to achieve its intended pedagogical impact, PL policies must move beyond compliance-oriented designs and instead create coherent, supportive conditions that recognise teachers' agency, professional judgment, and contextual expertise, as reflected in how teachers themselves understand and report their engagement with policy.

Ethical statement

The Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Primary Education, University of Education, Hue University granted approval for this study (Ref. No. 023/XNGDTH).

Declaration of AI using assisted technologies

The authors affirm that no artificial intelligence or AI-assisted technologies were used in the conception, execution, analysis, or writing of this manuscript.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Thi Quynh Nga Tran: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft. **Cam Ly Trinh:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft. **Thi Ngoc Anh Le:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. **Hong-Van Thi Dinh:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Xuan Van Ha:** Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2026.103233>.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request at: tcly.sgddt@tphcm.gov.vn.

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