

Examining the Impact of Community Engagement Projects as Incentives for Teacher Professional Development

XiuYing Yang¹

Abstract

The need for continual teacher PD is crucial as educational systems adapt to the changing world. Incentives are essential for all professions, including teaching, to motivate employees and ensure long-term retention. Therefore, the main agenda of the study is to evaluate the effectiveness of community engagement projects as incentives for teachers' professional development. For this purpose, a qualitative research design has been employed using a semi-structured interview. Sixteen in-service secondary school teachers were chosen using the purposive and snowball sampling methods. The results of this in-depth study indicate that the majority of the teachers perceive community engagement projects positively as part of their professional development. Autonomy, motivation, and the transformation of teaching philosophies are found to be major contributing factors in terms of incentives for teachers' professional development. The findings of the study might be helpful for policymakers to include mandatory community engagement projects in teacher education courses.

Keywords: *Community Engagement Projects, Incentives, In-service TEACHERS, Teacher Professional Development*

INTRODUCTION

China has one of the largest educational systems in the world. In China, as of December 2017, there were 513,800 schools of varying types and sizes, housing 16.27 million full-time educators and 270 million registered pupils (Zhou, 2019). Maintaining and supporting this huge educational system requires committed and skilled teachers. Realising the importance of teachers, in 2018, China took national strategies for developing the teaching profession and later issued an "action plan for the revitalization of teacher education (2018–2022)". In this respect, teacher professional development plays an important role in continuous growth, enhancing their teaching skills and keeping them up-to-date about current educational trends. To incorporate new pedagogical techniques, meet the different needs of students, and adapt to changing educational environments, teachers must engage in professional learning (Darling-Hammond, 2017). This is also important for increasing job satisfaction and teacher retention (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Consequently, teacher professional development is essential to establishing a dynamic and conducive learning environment that is advantageous to both teachers and students, in addition to helping them to fulfil their professional standards.

To ensure the retention and development of highly efficient teachers, incentive schemes are introduced to provide motivation and encouragement. These incentives vary in type, scope, and frequency, ranging from monetary rewards to non-monetary options like community engagement projects. Noddings (2012) has opined that community engagement cultivates a feeling of caring and ethical responsibility among teachers by developing a link between the classroom and the larger societal setting. This is also in line with the concept of the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (1978), according to which culture and society influence the social process of learning.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) asserts that people are driven by their basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Incentives in terms of community engagement projects can give teachers control over their professional development decisions, thus giving them a sense of autonomy. It can also improve their competency by giving them exposure to real-life learning, and finally, it can develop a feeling of community.

¹ School of Teacher Education, Jining University; No. 1, Xingtian Road, Qufu City, Shandong Province, China Email: 1613854183@qq.com

The experiential learning theory of Kolbe (1984) emphasises the importance of direct experiences in the learning process. This also aligns with the “learning by doing” concept of Dewey (1938). The active participation of teachers in community engagement projects would enhance their professional skills by providing direct exposure to first-hand experiences where they can apply their pedagogical knowledge and reflect.

As per social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), by observing, imitating, and then modelling, individuals learn. By engaging in community projects, teachers get the opportunity to observe and model effective community practices. Teaching and learning, being a social process, can benefit from incorporating these strategies into the formal education system. Teachers can develop professionally by performing socially and culturally approved practices.

According to Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory, through the expansion of consciousness, one can develop critical reflection, bring about changes in perspective of life, and increase empathy. Participation in community engagement projects can provide teachers with a transformative learning opportunity that might help them shape their attitudes, values, beliefs, and professional identities, and guide them to serve the education system in the best possible manner. In China, financial aid has been given to teachers as incentives (Li & Lo, 2019). For teacher education, incentives are required to motivate the teachers. In this context, recent studies show that community engagement practices are gaining interest worldwide. The study by Butcher et al. (2003) indicated the importance of community engagement in relation to teachers’ efficacy and for knowing the lives of marginalised sections. One study (Coffey, 2010) suggested community engagement projects help pre-service teachers link theoretical knowledge with practical world. Keller (2019) saw this as a part of a service learning project for pre-service teachers to make them culturally competent. As the present study wishes to explore community engagement for professional development, a previous study in China indicated that the professional development of teachers can change their beliefs (Lo, 2019).

Problem Statement and Research Gap

While many studies focus on community engagement, few examine community engagement programs as incentives for teachers. No such studies are found with respect to the Chinese setting and perspective as well. It is evident that there is a dearth of research in this field, and thus, the present study intends to study the impact of community engagement projects as incentives for teachers’ professional development. The study is focused on the in-service teachers of secondary schools in China.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

To address the research gap, this study aims to explore the effectiveness of community engagement projects as incentives for teachers’ professional development. Through this investigation, the researcher wishes to seek answer for the following research questions:

What are teachers' overall experiences and perceptions regarding their involvement in community projects?

How do teachers perceive their professional development through this community engagement project?

How do teachers perceive community engagement projects as an incentive?

What kind of challenges do they face during community engagement projects?

Significance of the Study

The exploration of the influence of community engagement project as incentives for teachers’ professional development has multifaceted implication for policy makers, students, and the community apart from its main target the teachers. Such effective implications are discussed below:

Teachers can realise how community engagement is an integral part of their profession through this study. This will enhance their teaching skills, motivation, and overall effectiveness inside as well as outside the classroom.

This knowledge will guide them to make informed decisions regarding their professional growth and actively participate in meaningful community initiatives. Moreover, teacher education programmes can enhance the existing curriculum by incorporating the findings of the study.

The study outcome has direct implications for students as teachers involved in community projects are likely to apply enriched experiences, innovative teaching strategies, and varied perspectives in teaching-learning processes. This way, students will receive relevant and dynamic educational experiences and knowledge about societal issues. This will promote their holistic development beyond only curricular knowledge and become responsible citizens.

Policymakers can take a positive note from the study to refine their existing policies and develop new ones by incorporating mandatory community engagement for teachers. By using the research findings, they can create targeted programmes that match the teachers' needs and choices.

Community is an indispensable part of the educational ecosystem. Taking advantages from the study, they can involve in the educational practices of the institute and this collaborative tie-up among teachers, students, institution, and community would result in the promotion of overall community well-being. In return, the bonding between the educational institute and community would be stronger. The educational institutes can develop specific professional development programmes for their in-service teachers.

METHOD

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the community engagement projects as an effective incentive for teachers' professional development from teachers' perspective. Qualitative research has the potential to study sample's perception, behaviour, and experiences in depth (Tenny, 2022). This qualitative approach has involved a semi-structured interview of Chinese in-service teachers, teaching in secondary schools. The researcher intends to delve into the rich and diverse narratives of the in-service teachers to get insights about the complexities of their professional development journey through this research approach.

Sample Selection and Participants

To provide a broad sample of Chinese in-service teachers teaching in secondary schools who have participated in community engagement projects, the study has employed a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling strategies to identify Chinese in-service secondary school teachers who may offer unique and compelling perspectives on the chosen research questions. The sample includes both male and female teachers.

At first, the study adopted a purposive sampling technique to select the sample, aligning with the criteria of the study. At this stage, eight teachers have been selected who are presently teachers in secondary schools in China, who are attending or have attended in-service teacher training, who have at least two years of teaching experience at the secondary school level, and most importantly, who have participated in community engagement programmes as a part of their teacher training course. In the next phase, snowball sampling is employed to select eight more participants for the study. The already-chosen eight participants are asked to recommend one participant each who satisfies the above-mentioned selection criteria. Therefore, the study involves a total of 16 samples, and their details are given in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Sample Profile

Sample	Age	Gender	Experience in secondary School	Subject Area
Participant 1	32	Male	8	Chemistry
Participant 2	40	Female	15	Chinese Literature
Participant 3	28	Male	4	Physics
Participant 4	35	Female	10	History
Participant 5	39	Male	14	Mathematics
Participant 6	31	Female	7	English
Participant 7	45	Female	20	Geography
Participant 8	33	Female	9	Computer Science
Participant 9	36	Male	12	Biology
Participant 10	29	Male	5	Chinese Language

Participant 11	42	Female	18	Physical Education
Participant 12	34	Male	11	Economics
Participant 13	37	Female	13	Chemistry
Participant 14	30	Female	6	Art
Participant 15	43	Male	19	Music
Participant 16	38	Female	16	Chinese History

Semi-structured Interview Schedule for Data Collection

To understand the impact of community engagement projects as incentives for professional development from the perspective of in-service secondary school teachers in China, a semi-structured interview schedule has been developed. The schedule consists of thirteen open-ended questions for the teachers. The questionnaire also includes a 14th item, which is a single rating-scale type question to measure their perspectives quantitatively. The questionnaire is grounded in the four identified theoretical bases: experiential learning theory (ELT), social learning theories, self-determination theory (SDT), and transformative learning theory. The distribution of questions aligning with different theories and aspects is presented in Table 3.2. The interview schedule has been validated by the opinions of three experts from relevant fields of study.

Table 3.2 Different Aspects of Interview Schedule

Theoretical Basis	Aspects	Interview Questions
Experiential Theory (ELT)	Learning Direct experiences in learning and reflection on experiences	1. How have your experiences in community engagement projects contributed to your professional development? 2. How has the practical application of educational theories influenced your teaching? 3. Can you share a specific instance where you reflected on your teaching practices through a community project?
Social Learning Theories	Learning through observation, imitation, and modeling	4. Have you observed any effective teaching practices from your peers or community members during engagement projects that influenced your teaching? If yes, kindly describe your experience. 5. How has observational learning played a role in your professional development?
Self-Determination Theory (SDT)	Fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs	6. How do community engagement projects fulfill your need for autonomy in professional development? 7. Can you share an experience where you felt a strong sense of autonomy in your professional development decisions? 8. In what ways do you feel a sense of competence and relatedness through your involvement in these projects?
Transformative Theory	Learning Critical reflection, perspective transformation	9. Have your beliefs or perspectives on teaching transformed as a result of your experiences in community projects? 10. How has critical reflection played a role in your professional development through engagement projects? 11. Can you provide an example of a transformative moment in your teaching philosophy influenced by community engagement?
Overall perspective on community engagement project		12. Do you consider community engagement project as an incentive for teachers' professional development? Justify your answer. 13. What are the challenges you have faced during your participation in the community engagement project? 14. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the perceived impact of community engagement projects on your overall professional development with respect to: i.Skill enhancement ii.Job satisfaction iii.Career advancement

Data Collection Procedure

The study involves the interview of sixteen sample participants representing in-service secondary school teachers in China who have experience participating in a community engagement project during their training period. Therefore, at first, eight participants chosen purposively gave their written consent to take part in this study voluntarily. They have been interviewed online using Tencent Meeting, a reliable video-conferencing software being used in China. The above-mentioned semi-structured interview schedule, consisting of 12 questions, is asked of them individually. The complete interview session is recorded. The total time allotted for each candidate ranges from 30 minutes to 45 minutes. After the completion of each interview, the sample has been asked to suggest another sample following the same criteria of the study. Their contact details are collected and verified. Next, these eight samples selected by the snowball method are interviewed following the same steps and rules as the earlier set. All sixteen interview recordings are transcribed by qualified research assistants. Moreover, all sixteen participants are asked to provide a registration certificate for their teacher training course and evidence like pictures or a certificate for a community engagement project.

Data Analysis

To analyse the qualitative data from the transcripts of the interviews, thematic analysis has been adopted. During this process, coding and categorization are used to derive meaningful outcomes from the interviews. The interpretations have been made under the lens of the earlier-mentioned four theories.

Ethical Considerations

Written consent from each participant is collected after briefing them on the intention of the study. In terms of ethical consideration, it is imperative to guarantee participant confidentiality. Strict confidentiality protocols have been implemented to ensure the protection of teachers' personal information. All data records, including transcriptions of interviews and observational notes, have maintained the anonymity of research participants.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The sample of the study consists of 7 male and 9 female participants, whose ages range from 28 to 45 years. Their teaching experiences range from a minimum of 4 years to a maximum of 20 years. Samples are purposively selected from various subject domains to get varied perspectives. The main subject areas are biology, chemistry, Chinese language, history, music, and many more. They all confirmed that they are or were participants in at least one community engagement project during their training.

Experiences In Community Engagement Projects That Contributed to Professional Development

The findings indicate that most of the teachers (50%) expressed that community engagement projects positively contributed to their professional development. Participant 12 mentioned that collaborating with local businesses for a career guidance project not only enhanced his understanding of students' career aspirations but also allowed him to align teaching strategies with the career-oriented standards outlined in the national curriculum. While others mentioned it has strengthened her ability to integrate practical, hands-on activities into the classroom (Participant 13), made teaching more relevant and engaging for students (Participant 9), and connected with diverse educational resources and teaching methodologies (Participant 2). However, 12.5% of teachers gave negative feedback, mentioning the time-consuming nature of coordinating such projects, which impacts work-life balance. But 37.5% of teachers reported a more neutral outlook, acknowledging participation in community projects like art exhibitions and mentorship programs. While these initiatives provided valuable interactions and exposure to diverse resources, they did not lead to radical transformations in their teaching methods. The overall feedback is presented in Figure 4.1.

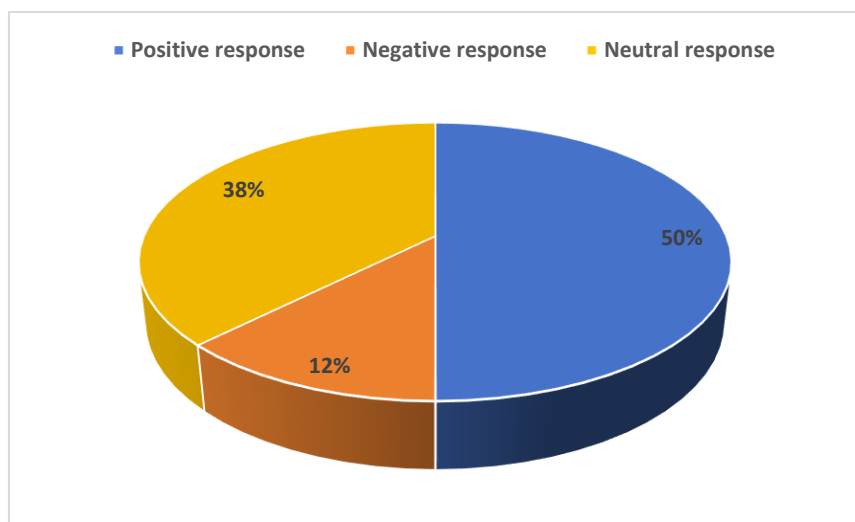


Figure 4.1 Feedback on Contribution of Community Engagement Projects to Professional Development

Practical Application of Educational Theories Influencing Teaching

Feedback regarding the practical application of educational theories among secondary school teachers in China highlighted a major emphasis on active and student-centred learning approaches. Most of the participants stressed how constructivist techniques, including project-based learning, have a transformational effect on making classroom environments lively and engaging. Some teachers are found to mention integrated technology with the TPACK framework (Participant 8), formative assessments (Participant 6), differentiated instruction (Participant 16), and critical pedagogy (Participant 3). These practices demonstrated a dedication to meeting the needs of students with varying learning styles and were in line with national curriculum requirements. It is important to note that different subject areas and teaching styles place different emphasis on these theories and that there are variances in how they are applied.

Reflection On Teaching Practices Through a Community Project

Teachers have reported deep reflections that led to transformative changes in their teaching approaches. Common themes that surfaced were the incorporation of real-world applications and a reassessment of the balance between conventional teaching techniques and contemporary expressions. To delve deep into their perspectives, some of the notable feedback is presented in Table 4.1 under quotations. According to the research findings, community initiatives can work as stimulants for reflective teaching methods and help teachers adopt a continual improvement perspective.

Table 4.1 Responses of Teachers on Reflection

Participant	Subject Areas	Project	Quotations
Participant 9	Biology	Science Fair	“Guiding students in developing a project on environmental pollution not only aligned with national science education standards but also prompted me to reconsider the emphasis on real-world applications in my biology lessons. It provided students with opportunities to address pertinent challenges.”
Participant 5	Mathematics	Career Guidance Event	“Organizing a career guidance event in collaboration with local professionals exposed my mathematics students to various real-world applications of mathematical concepts. Subsequently, I integrated more practical problem-solving tasks into my lessons, emphasizing more on the application of mathematical skills in diverse contexts.”
Participant 2	Chinese Literature	Literature Project	“Collaborating with students on creating a literary magazine encouraged me to reconsider the balance between traditional literature analysis and modern creative expression in my lessons. It emphasized the importance of nurturing students’ creativity while meeting curriculum requirements.”
Participant 8	Computer Science	Coding Project	“Collaborating with students on developing a coding solution for a local issue aligned with national computer science education standards, inspiring me to reconsider the integration of real-world problem-solving tasks in my lessons.”

Participant 11	Physical Education	Community Fitness Initiative	"...encouraged me to reassess the balance between theoretical knowledge and practical health application in my lessons. This experience shows the importance of promoting lifelong fitness habits among my students."
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Role Of Observational Learning in Professional Development

When the teachers are asked if any particular teaching technique of their peers or any community member has influenced their teacher, the majority of them affirm that peer collaboration and community contributions significantly influenced their teaching methods afterward. Most of them mentioned learning practical applications, experiential learning, and collaborative approaches from their peers. Therefore, community engagement projects provide scope for the dynamic exchange of innovative teaching strategies among educators, with a clear impact on the adaptation of these practices into their individual teaching philosophies.

The participants have mentions various teaching strategies which they never used in their classroom, but started adopting them successfully in recent time after observing their peers or community members using those techniques. Some of the observed teaching strategies are presented in the Figure 4.2



Figure 4.2 Observed Teaching Strategies

Community Engagement Projects Fulfilling the Need for Autonomy in Professional Development

In this section, most of the teachers said that community engagement projects empowered them to make decisions independently, fostering a sense of ownership. Participant 7 mentioned how engaging in a curriculum innovation project made her feel a strong sense of autonomy in her professional development. Leading a team to revamp the curriculum for geography classes gave her the freedom to explore new teaching methodologies. Another participant (Participant 4) reported that collaborating with peer teachers from different subject areas to design interdisciplinary projects provided the flexibility to explore innovative teaching methods. An English teacher (Participant 6) remembered how, by collaborating with language teachers from international schools, she had the freedom to design language-focused activities, adapting global perspectives to her language arts curriculum. These instances showed that community engagement not only gave autonomy but also developed creativity among teachers.

Sensing Competence and Relatedness Through These Projects

The study results, which come from Chinese secondary school teachers who took part in a range of community involvement initiatives, highlight a notable improvement in their sense of relatedness and competence. A chemistry teacher (Participant 13) confirmed that his competence in linking theoretical knowledge with practical activities has been enhanced after participating in a project-based science camp. The Chinese literature teacher (Participant 2) learned how to improve students' critical analysis and literary appreciation after attending a book club. In addition to broadening a history teacher's content knowledge, producing multimedia content that examines historical events helps her build a sense of relatedness with students as they study and discuss historical narratives together (Participant 4). The physics teacher (Participant 3) told that virtual experiments help him become more proficient at utilising technology to teach, and they also help students feel more connected to one another as they participate in practical, interactive learning opportunities. Also, many of them mentioned enhancing the cross-disciplinary connections.

Transformation Of Beliefs or Perspectives on Teaching

As stated by the participants, community engagement programmes have provided Chinese secondary school teachers with life-changing experiences that have profoundly impacted their beliefs and pedagogical viewpoints. By participating in student-led science fairs, their conventional role of knowledge giver was reshaped to facilitator (Participant 13). Working together on cross-disciplinary environmental initiatives demonstrated how topics are related to one another and influenced the shift to a more interdisciplinary approach (Participant 9). Launching global citizenship programmes emphasised the value of having a globally minded viewpoint, but education is only based in local contexts (Participant 7). Creating accessible and inclusive learning spaces became a priority after attending seminars on inclusive education (Participant 1). The idea of mathematics as an isolated topic itself was changed by community-based mathematics competitions, which placed an emphasis on real-world applications (Participant 5). Projects promoting digital literacy have redirected attention to developing fundamental technical skills (Participant 14). Historical simulation has shown the effectiveness of hands-on learning in the study of history (Participant 4). These instances, coming vividly from the participants, directly prove how effectively those community projects have changed their teaching philosophies.

Community Engagement Project As An Incentive For Teachers' Professional Development

Among the 16 participants in the study, twelve of them positively affirmed that community engagement can be regarded as an incentive for the professional development of the teachers, whereas three teachers took the neutral side, but one particular teacher said that it cannot be thought of as an incentive. The positive feedback includes the following mentions: continuous growth as an educator, motivating force, catalyst for continuous improvement, fostering cultural appreciation, engaging in meaningful projects, being collaborative, and being thought-provoking. However, the teacher who did not approve of it mentioned that community engagement could be an added burden for teachers, as they are already finding it hard to finish the syllabus.

Challenges Faced during Participating in the Community Engagement Project

The interviewee also reported some unforeseen challenges they encountered while participating in various community projects. Participant 3 said that at times he could not balance between the community project commitments and his regular teaching responsibilities, which made his life more stressful. Many of them mentioned resource constraints like funding, materials, manpower, and most importantly, technology (Participant 4, 11, 15, 16). Participant 6 faced challenges while coordinating with different stakeholders in the community project. They sensed a lack of enthusiasm among students and resistance among community members (Participants 1, 8, and 9). The results are presented in Figure 4.3.



Figure 4.3 Perceived Challenges

Perceived Impact of Community Engagement Projects On Overall Professional Development

The findings of the study with respect to skill enhancement showed that the majority of participants (90%) provided positive ratings for skill enhancement, with scores ranging from 7 to 9, whereas only 10% gave neutral responses. None of them gave a negative response in this respect. Job satisfaction-related outcomes show that the majority of them (75%) rated it positively, 18% rated it neutrally, and only 7% rated it negatively. Additionally, 80% gave a positive, 15% gave a neutral, and 5% gave a negative rating with respect to career advancement.

Overall, the result points to a mostly favourable impression of how community involvement initiatives affect teachers' professional growth, job satisfaction, and skill development, which is consistent with the goals of professional development incentives. However, the few negative and neutral answers draw attention to how different each participant's experiences and viewpoints are from one another. The overall rating is presented in Figure 4.4.

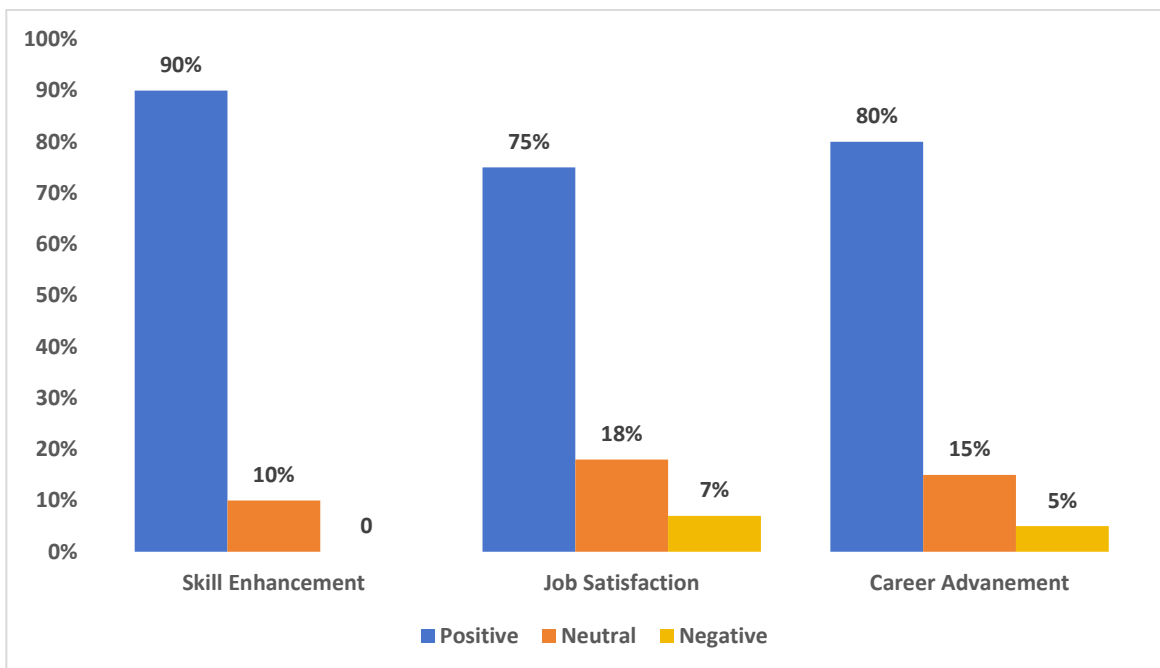


Figure 4.4 Consolidated Ratings on Professional Growth, Job Satisfaction, and Skill Development

DISCUSSION

Teachers' Overall Experiences and Perceptions Regarding Their Involvement in Community Projects

All sixteen in-service teachers have participated in at least one community engagement programme during their teacher training programme. Most of them reported that they had a positive experience, though quite a few of them had a neutral response. It suggests that teachers not only participated but also processed the experience and made sense of their encounter. This is nothing but 'reflective observation' according to Kolb's model. They have mentioned that they got to know about the career aspirations of the students through these programmes and later took career-focused teaching approaches in their teaching. One of the most important aspects of these community engagement services was their hands-on experience. This aligns with the 'concrete experience' stage of Kolb's experiential learning model (1984), in which an individual actively takes part in a new endeavor. The interview also revealed how different learning theories can be involved in these activities, among which constructivism is the most prominent. Others have mentioned the TPACK framework, formative assessments, differentiated instruction, and critical pedagogy concepts. This reflects the teachers' efforts to conceptualise and integrate their learned experiences into a broader theoretical structure. This gave them ideas about how to make their teaching strategies more relevant and engaging at the same time by involving various educational resources. It is important to mention here that the relevance of the content contributes more effectively to the professional development of the teachers (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). However, some found these experiences valuable but not inspiring enough to change their own teaching approaches. This can be justified by a previous study that stated that teachers are less likely to incorporate new ideas into their routines when they are offered professional development and are more dissimilar from their own teaching approaches (Dingle et al., 2011; Snyder et al., 2011). Having mentioned that, it is also important to state that previous studies have reported that the more time vested in any activity, the more positive effect it will yield with respect to professional development (Yoon et al., 2007; Desimone, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009).

Professional Development through This Community Engagement Project

Eighty percent of the sample confirmed that they can perceive these community engagement projects as incentives during their teacher training. There is proof that educators self-report better levels of support for recently learned practices when professional development allows for possibilities for active engagement

(Banilower & Shimkus, 2004). Many found it a motivating force, a catalyst for continuous improvement, fostering cultural appreciation, engaging in meaningful projects, collaborative, and thought-provoking, which could help in continuous growth as a true educator. Collaboration has been shown to be beneficial in influencing changes throughout the school by promoting learning via the sharing of ideas and reflection on practices sparked by teacher interaction (Leko et al., 2015). To be identified as “high-quality” professional development, four criteria must be fulfilled: intensity, active learning, relevance, and collaboration (Desimone, 2009). A community engagement project thus satisfies all four requisites, as stated by the interviewee. It is stated that involving outside knowledge increases the effectiveness of professional growth (Cordingley et al., 2015; Dunst et al., 2015; Walter & Briggs, 2012). This is justified by the need for challenge or new ideas rather than repurposing internal school knowledge that instructors may already be acquainted with. They also mentioned how they have learned new teaching strategies from their peers or other community members which was previously unexplored by them. According to Bandura (1977) this is nothing but social learning through modelling.

As an overall perspective on how engaging in community projects fosters professional development among teachers, the majority of the experienced in-service teachers reported that this increases their teaching skills, job satisfaction, and career growth. These are the major factors leading to the professional development of teachers. According to earlier studies, teachers' opinions about their profession are linked to how satisfied they are with professional development, which in turn affects how they teach (Didion et al., 2020). Participants may strongly support mandatory professional development if the goals and advantages of the program are made evident to them, making it worthwhile for them to participate (Dunst et al., 2015). A widely discussed concept in Western countries is “professional learning communities,” which underscore the collaborative efforts of teachers for their professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The common effective elements that came out of the present teachers' interview are shared goals and ideals, professional reflection, group accountability for students' education, both individual and group learning, and learning-focused cooperation. These are all essential features of professional learning communities (PLCs). These reflect that, though PLC as a concept is new in Chinese, it is deeply embedded in its collaborative teaching practices, like community engagement projects.

Participating in Community Engagement Projects as Incentives

Motivation is the key factor in retention in any profession. If teachers lack professional motivation and are not well-trained, then material rewards will improve neither student learning nor teacher engagement (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002). In this study, during community engagement projects, teachers got exposed to other teaching techniques, some of which have influenced them heavily. Peer collaboration contributed positively. It is suggested that group participation in professional development by teachers yields more benefits (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). The demand for cooperation is typically expressed as the necessity of working in a "community of practice" or with several peers. This is because it allows teachers to confront one another and clear up any misconceptions. Many of the teachers said that they learned how to use practical, experiential, and collaborative approaches in their teaching from their peers during community activities. Some of the innovative teaching strategies they mentioned are interactive activities in formative assessments, collaborative lesson planning, student-led parent-teacher conferences, collaborative project-based learning, and so on. Most of them found this approach very student-centric and activity-based.

Study showed that teachers' involvement in decision-making leads to ownership, dedication, and job satisfaction, as they work happily towards implementing their chosen goals (Liontos, 2004). Community engagement projects during teacher education were found to develop capacities like making independent decisions, a sense of ownership, and a sense of autonomy. Teachers can be driven by these basic psychological needs as stated by the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to a study conducted in Taiwan, among the main elements that motivate primary school teachers were accomplishment, autonomy, demanding job, and professional development (Chu & Kuo, 2015). This autonomy is precious to Chinese teachers; otherwise, they fear “losing face.” This typical behavior is rooted in the “collective” culture of China, as it is seen as humiliating and self-serving to make someone “lose face” (Zhang et al., 2021). Chinese culture

values collective attachment and absorption above individualism, and people are urged to act in the community's best interests rather than their own. The teachers had the flexibility to explore innovative teaching methods. It has been seen that, even in schools with limited resources, professional development coupled with community engagement can support the growth of a teacher's motivation, dedication, and well-being (Sargent & Hannum, 2009).

A notable improvement in sense of relatedness and competence was reported by the teachers who participated in community engagement projects. Teachers who can relate to and support professional development are thought to benefit from it more (Cordingley et al., 2015; Walter & Briggs, 2012). Some teachers said that they became competent to link theoretical knowledge with practical activities in their teaching. Opportunities to put newly acquired knowledge into practice are a key component of professional development that increases its effectiveness by enabling teachers to apply what they have learned in the classroom to actual circumstances (Wei et al., 2009). This method is frequently contrasted with lectures, in which teachers passively absorb new knowledge without putting it to use. When broad pedagogical approaches and the subject matter are combined, professional development is most successful (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). For language teachers, a marked improvement was noted in critical analysis and literary appreciation among their students. Another study (Didion et al., 2020) also stated in the same vein that the professional development of teachers has a significant positive influence on the reading achievement of the students. Fernández-Batanero et al. (2022) highlighted in a meta-analysis the scarcity of sufficient ICT training in teacher training. But here, the history teacher learned how to include multimedia in teaching to enhance its relevance among the students. Many of them mentioned their enhanced capacity for using ICT in teaching and learning. Therefore, community engagement indirectly enhances other skills as well. As many teachers from diverse subject areas collaborate on community projects, it leads to cross-disciplinary teaching approaches that are more comprehensive in nature.

Community engagement projects have not only positively influenced their teaching strategies but have also changed their values and pedagogical perspective of teaching as a profession. This indicates expansion of their consciousness as per Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory. An established framework (Desimone, 2009) suggested that teachers who get excellent professional development see improvements in their knowledge and abilities as well as changes in their attitudes and beliefs. Their views as teachers have become more inclined towards interdisciplinary and inclusive approaches. They have started to perceive things globally, but based on local contexts. They have become more technologically sound and can use technology-mediated simulations in different subject areas. In a nutshell, their teaching philosophy has largely changed. China started a drastic curriculum overhaul in 2001 with the goal of producing people who can compete worldwide. In this context, teachers must change the way they teach to fit the new curriculum reform. For instance, to transition from teacher-centered to student-centered education and help students become active participants in the classroom, teachers are required to acquire and implement cutting-edge teaching techniques (Chen, 2020). It seems community engagement has all the potential to satisfy the requirements of the new curriculum reform.

Therefore, community engagement projects can be considered as a mastery goal incentive as it is evident from the study that participating in these programmes provide motivation to expand ones' knowledge and the joy of learning (Wagner & Reiner, 2015) and teaching. Teacher's status and social recognition also act as motivation, thus are considered as incentives (Vaillant & Rossel, 2012). Though, there have been a lot study on monetary incentives but its usage cannot be increased always as it is expensive and teachers are generally not in favour of cash as their reward on moral ground (Schildberg-Hörisch & Wagner, 2020). Workers prefer tangible, long-lasting awards over money, as they believe non-monetary rewards can hold people's memories for a longer period (Silverman, 2004). Teachers who know they are contributing to and will benefit their institution are more inclined to work on these challenges and are delighted to do so (Mwalilino, 2020). From every perspective it is confirmed that community engagement projects can be considered as an effective non-monetary incentive for professional development of the teachers.

Challenges Faced During Community Engagement Projects

Although the Chinese in-service secondary school teachers showed a positive attitude towards community engagement projects in terms of incentives, a few challenges were also being faced. The most reported challenge

is its time constraints. It became stressful to balance their day-to-day teaching duties and community tasks. One of the reasons teachers felt unmotivated for their profession was their enormous workload (Kadzamila, 2006). Limited financial support and other resource shortages were also significant issues. A study found lower pay in rural China discourages teachers from participating in after-work professional development programmes (Tang et al., 2018). Technological assistance was also very minimal. Getting support and enthusiasm from the community as well as students was also a great challenge. Similar to this study, teachers' preferences for motivating elements also varied across Tanzania, according to the findings (Tumaini, 2015). These results suggest that different teachers had different reactions to the same type of incentive. Diverse personalities and preferences necessitate distinct kinds of rewards. As a result, meeting teachers' requirements calls for acknowledgment and awareness of pertinent incentives.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of the study is to explore community engagement projects in the realm of teacher education and come to an agreement whether it can be considered as an incentives for professional development of the teachers. The in-depth interview with experienced teachers revealed that majority of them perceive the contribution positively. They not only affirmed but provided ample instances from their hands-on experiences on how community programmes enhances their teaching skills, transform their teaching philosophies and gave sense of confidence and autonomy. This feeling of satisfaction acts as an incentive for the teachers which goes beyond the monetary rewards and contributes in teachers' professional development. Apart from this, it establishes a network of professionals and academics that facilitates cooperation, allows for the sharing of resources, yields fresh insights, and increases the overall influence of the academic discipline.

Limitation And Recommendation for Further Studies

Limitation	Recommendation for Further Studies
The sample of the study being limited, might affect the generalisability of the findings.	To incorporate a more representative and diverse group of teachers, future studies should think about increasing the sample size.
The study has included in-service secondary school teachers from various domains. Though, it has provided diversity in perspectives but the perspectives on community engagement might differ based on subject area which may lead to misinterpretation.	A future study can undertake a comparative analysis of the same research problem with respect to subject areas as well as different levels of education. This will give a more vivid picture of their perspectives.
The self-reported findings might have personal and social biases.	A future study should take a mixed-methods approach, including observation, a quantitative survey, and an open-ended interview, to get an unbiased result.
	More study can be undertaken to explore and modify policies on community engagement projects in teacher education with respect to professional development. It must investigate the actual effectiveness of this as an incentive in comparison to conventional monetary incentives.

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