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He, Yingying

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Yingying He, Katriina Maaranen & Kirsi Tirri

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Why volunteer to teach? The motivation of volunteer student teachers to enter the teaching profession

Yingying He, Katriina Maaranen and Kirsi Tirri

Department of Education, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

Service learning, as a practice that links community service with learning activities, is gaining popularity in teacher education as an experiential educational approach. However, a deeper understanding of teachers' motivation in service learning is required to improve teacher retention and commitment. Utilising the Factors Influencing Teaching Choice (FIT-Choice) framework, this empirical study attempts to understand the reasons why student teachers volunteer in rural China and the differences between volunteer and non-volunteer teachers in their motivation and perception of the profession. The sample includes 201 volunteer and 812 non-volunteer student teachers. The results validate the FIT-Choice scale for Chinese volunteer student teachers and reveal significant differences in most motivational factors between the two groups. Volunteer student teachers perceive the teaching profession as less demanding and more rewarding than their non-volunteer counterparts. Moreover, they express greater satisfaction with their career choice. This research advocates for volunteer teaching as a valuable pedagogical approach to teacher education and a means of addressing teacher shortages.

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FIT-Choice framework; service learning; teacher motivation; volunteer student teacher

Introduction

Extensive research has been conducted on teacher motivation to address the challenges of teacher shortages and attract quality educators. However, there is a lack of studies focusing on the motivation of student teachers engaged in service learning. This paper explores the motivations of Chinese student teachers who volunteer in rural areas with limited resources. Previous research on teacher motivation in China has often treated student teachers as a homogeneous group, focusing primarily on extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable gap in studies especially focusing on volunteer student teachers from a more comprehensive perspective on motivation. This study addresses this gap by exploring how volunteer teaching, as a form of service learning, boosts teaching motivation and enhances teachers' commitment.

CONTACT Yingying He yingying.he@helsinki.fi

Teacher motivation in China

Teacher motivation literature commonly distinguishes between intrinsic, extrinsic, and altruistic motivation. Specifically, interest in the subject, a desire to work with children, and a commitment to societal betterment (Heinz 2015) are the most frequently mentioned motivations. However, a lack of consensus on the theoretical framework and conceptual categorisations of motivation have hindered more comprehensive findings (Watt and Richardson 2012). Furthermore, the tendency to treat pre-service teachers as a homogeneous group has led researchers to ignore subgroup variations (Heinz 2015), neglecting potential differences stemming from the particular socio-cultural context. This is the case for both the global and Chinese literature. Furthermore, previous studies on Chinese teacher motivation have demonstrated a shift in teachers' perception of the profession. Historically valued for its high social status, job security and welfare provision (Ye et al. 2021), the attractiveness of teaching has decreased since the breakdown of the 'iron rice bowl' (permanent employment) and the emergence of alternative careers since the economic revitalisation policy Reform and Open-up. In contrast to findings in Europe and North America, where student teachers are mostly intrinsically motivated (Watt and Richardson 2012), studies in China suggest that student teachers are predominately extrinsically motivated by factors like social mobility or 'obligations to serve the country, [and the] tuition [fee] waiver' (Liu 2010, 69). Notably, despite their reluctance to become teachers (X. Gao 2010; Su et al. 2001), a significant number of student teachers choose to volunteer in economically disadvantaged areas. This is particularly intriguing as China is undergoing a significant social transition influenced by Confucian and collective cultural factors, a rise in individualism and economic growth. However, to our knowledge, no research has examined the motivations of volunteer student teachers in a way that considers both socio-cultural and psychological factors while also being mindful of the ongoing social transformation. Therefore, this paper explores and compares entry motivations of two teacher subgroups: student teachers who volunteer to teach in rural areas through school or government volunteer teaching practicum projects (hereafter referred to as volunteer student teachers) and those who complete their internships through other non-volunteer teaching practicums (hereafter referred to as non-volunteer student teachers).

Student teachers in service learning

Service learning has gained global popularity and recognition over the last two decades. It is a critical paradigm and pedagogy extending beyond the classroom to connect academic learning with community needs (Castellan 2012). It has demonstrated its value as a powerful experiential educational method, promoting theory-to-practise connections and pupils' civic responsibility and community engagement, and offering transformative potential to support teacher learning (Saeed and Ahmed 2021). In response to teacher shortage, service learning has been applied to teacher education projects particularly in rural areas, including programmes like 'Teach for All', which operates in 18 countries (Teach for All n.d.). Students are recruited from leading universities to teach in hard-to-staff, financially disadvantaged areas. As a specific type of service learning, voluntary teaching empowers student teachers and benefits volunteer teachers, teacher educators,

universities, and the local community (Saeed and Ahmed 2021), as X. Gao (2015) notes that volunteer teachers demonstrate a higher level of commitment than local teachers in hinterland regions.

Nonetheless, despite its growing popularity (Qiao and A'rong 2008), volunteerism in education is undervalued. While most studies emphasise altruism as the primary voluntary reason (H. Zhou and Shang 2011), Holdsworth (2010) suggests volunteers are motivated by a mix of altruistic and egoistic factors. Moreover, Yin, Dooley, and Mu (2019) highlight volunteers' desire to 'revolt against stereotypical life modes'. More research is needed to understand volunteer teacher's motivation in terms of sociocultural factors and psychological characteristics.

Volunteer teaching in China

Governmental and social efforts in China are evident in utilising voluntary teaching to attract and retain teachers for rural schools. Prominent initiatives include the Free Pre-Service Teacher Education Programme and the Western China Programme, which encourage undergraduate or graduate students to teach voluntarily in rural areas, sometimes with preferential policies, such as easier access to postgraduate programmes or public service positions. Student teachers in normal universities (teacher education universities) are also encouraged to complete their teaching internships through volunteer teaching. For 2023 alone, Chinese government-initiated projects planned to send 17,410 teachers to rural areas for volunteer teaching (Y. Z. Gao and Cheng 2023). However, systematic knowledge about volunteer teachers in these programmes remains limited.

Traditionally, teachers in China are viewed as knowledgeable authorities and have enjoyed high prestige (Ye et al. 2021). Chinese society also values sacrifice, particularly for the collective good (Akosah-Twumasi et al. 2018), so teachers are expected to possess a strong sense of altruism and high morality (Ye et al. 2022). Nevertheless, recent years have witnessed a decline in the profession's social prestige (OECD 2020) due to the social transition mentioned above. In addition, a lack of well-trained volunteer teachers and poorly managed programmes have influenced the overall impact of volunteer teaching (Qiao and A'rong 2008). Moreover, some participants tend to view volunteer teaching as a 'temporary sanctuary' rather than a lifelong career (Yin, Dooley, and Mu 2019 386). Therefore, this study intends to deepen the understanding of volunteer student teachers by comparing the motivations of non-volunteer and volunteer student teachers, exploring correlations between motivational dimensions and their consequences. A comprehensive model, the Factors Influencing Teaching Choice (FIT-Choice), is chosen for this purpose.

FIT-Choice model

Tapping into altruistic, utilitarian, intrinsic motivations and ability-related beliefs, the FIT-Choice (Figure 1) model is deeply rooted in expectancy-value theory (Eccles and Wigfield 2020), which underscores the prominent role of success expectancies and subjective task valuation in the decision-making process (Richardson and Watt 2014). Previous motivation research has suffered from theoretical issues, such as inconsistent conceptualisations of key influencing factors, as well as methodological problems, such as a lack of

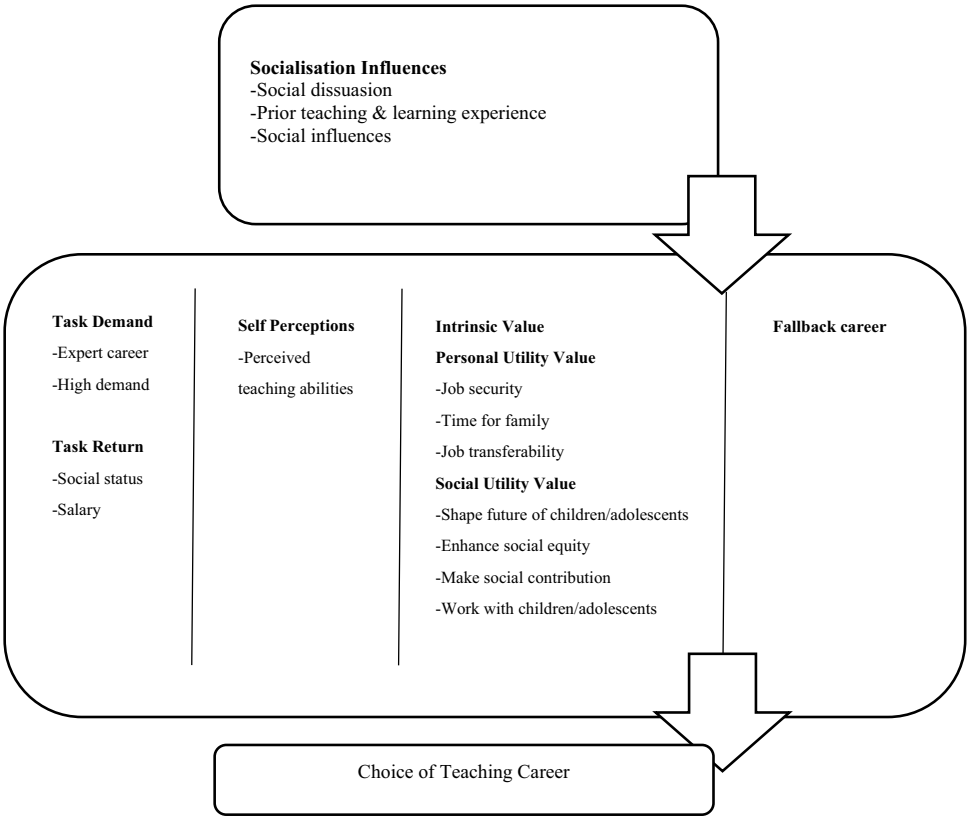

Figure 1. FIT-Choice theoretical Model (Watt and Richardson 2012, 187).

concurrence-validated measurement instruments. To provide an integrated theoretical and analytical framework of teacher motivation, Watt and Richardson (2007) proposed the FIT-Choice model, which centres on three main values: intrinsic values, personal utility values and social utility values. Additionally, the model incorporates individuals' perceptions of teaching tasks and their teaching abilities. The fallback career factor and antecedent socialisation constructs are added to explore the influence of alternative careers and the impact of previous experiences and social influences. Satisfaction with the choice of teaching is included at the end as an outcome variable. Comprising of 12 motivation factors and 6 factors for the perception of the teaching profession, the FIT-Choice scale was designed to integrate all components collectively to predict the choice of a teaching career and professional engagement outcome. Notably, this scale considers the potential impacts of social-cultural orientation and values on career motivations and has demonstrated validity in culturally diverse settings, including China (Watt and Richardson 2012).

Research questions

This article is the first application of the FIT-Choice model to volunteer student teachers to understand their values, motivations, and choice satisfaction. This study aims to answer 1)

How can the underlying construct of the FIT-Choice scale be validated with data from volunteer teachers? 2) Which factors influence volunteer student teachers' decision to voluntarily teach? 3) What distinguishes the motivations of volunteer student teachers from their non-volunteer counterparts when choosing to teach?

Instrument

The FIT-Choice scale comprises of two subscales: 'Motivation for Teaching' and 'Perception about Teaching and Satisfaction with Choice', with answers ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (extremely important) and from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely), respectively. The original FIT-Choice was developed based on data from Australian student teachers (Watt and Richardson 2007) and was subsequently adapted to the Chinese context (Lin et al. 2012). This study employed the Chinese version of the scale translated and validated by Lin and colleagues. In addition, as the subjects were completing a teaching internship, one further question, 'Do you want to be a teacher after graduation?' was added, with the answer options 'yes', 'no', or 'maybe'.

Participants

A total of 1013 subjects were recruited, with 998 enrolled in a normal university and 15 studying educational majors at a non-normal university. The survey was conducted online and maintained participant anonymity. A modest monetary incentive was offered to encourage participation. Participants provided informed consent prior to the survey and were ensured that all data would be treated with confidentiality and used solely for research purposes. No institutional ethical approval was needed for this study, and the participation was voluntary. Among the participants, 201 had volunteered or were volunteering through a school or government volunteer teaching practicum, while 812 were non-volunteer student teachers who participated in a non-volunteer teaching practicum.

Analyses

Cronbach's alpha was employed to assess the reliability of both subscales for volunteer and non-volunteer student teachers. The 'Motivation for Teaching' subscale consisted of 38 question items across 12 factors. Cronbach's alpha for non-volunteer participants and volunteer participants indicate a strong reliability (Table 1). The 'Perceptions about Teaching and Satisfaction with Choice' comprised 20 questions across six factors. For non-volunteer participants and volunteer participants, the Cronbach's alpha also indicates a strong reliability (Table 2). Both groups were found to have normal distribution with skewness values ranging from -3 to $+3$ and kurtosis -4 to $+4$.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to construct validity because the FIT-Choice scale is theoretically comprehensive and has been empirically validated in different settings. Considering the sample size and model complexity, model fitness was evaluated and acceptable model fit criteria were set at RMSEA ≤ 0.08, CFI ≥ 0.90 and

Table 1. Motivations for teaching: factor loadings and reliabilities for non-volunteer and volunteer student teachers.

Factors and items		Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha
		(non-volunteer/volunteer student teachers)	
		Ability	
na	B1	0.746/0.702	0.773/0.752
	B2	0.668/0.725	
	B3	0.775/0.706	
		Intrinsic career value	
na	B4	0.801/0.779	0.837/0.789
	B5	0.771/0.761	
	B6	0.818/0.693	
na		Fallback career	
	B7	0.635/0.702	0.726/0.743
	B8	0.708/0.736	
	B9	0.711/0.662	
Personal utility value		Job security	
(alpha = 0.846/0.854)	B10	0.735/0.693	0.779/0.752
	B11	0.712/0.721	
	B12	0.759/0.713	
		Time for family	
	B13	0.626/0.632	0.743/0.698
	B14	0.497/0.529	
	B15	0.697/0.522	
	B16	0.446/0.561	
	B17	0.756/0.602	
		Job transferability	
	B18	0.628/0.542	0.637/0.621
	B19	0.573/0.580	
	B20	0.628/0.657	
Factors and items		Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha
		(non-volunteer/volunteer student teachers)	
Social utility value		Shape future of children/adolescents	
(alpha = 0.934/0.907)	B21	0.736/0.789	0.779/0.757
	B22	0.694/0.589	
	B23	0.781/0.779	
		Enhance social equity	
	B24	0.801/0.730	0.804/0.767
	B25	0.789/0.698	
	B26	0.69/0.738	
		Make social contribution	
	B27	0.812/0.688	0.837/0.721
	B28	0.775/0.645	
	B29	0.799/0.727	
		Work with children/adolescents	
	B30	0.815/0.783	0.863/0.754
	B31	0.811/0.744	
	B32	0.846/0.621	
		Prior teaching and learning experiences	
na	B33	0.731/0.692	0.719/0.610
	B34	0.728/0.662	
	B35	0.619/0.482	
		Social influence	
na	B36	0.815/0.748	0.756/0.749
	B37	0.561/0.621	
	B38	0.783/0.763	

Table 2. Perception about teaching and satisfaction with choice: factor loadings and reliabilities for non-volunteer and volunteer student teachers.

Factors and items		Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha
		(non-volunteer/volunteer student teachers)	
Task demand		Expertise	
(alpha = 0.831/0.676)	C1	0.805/0.675	0.829/0.692
	C2	0.757/0.623	
	C3	0.799/0.669	
		Difficulty	
	C4	0.779/0.574	0.759/0.621
	C5	0.656/0.660	
	C6	0.714/0.551	
Task return		Social status	
(alpha = 0.873/0.824)	C7	0.5/0.608	0.870/0.787
	C8	0.772/0.670	
	C9	0.795/0.556	
	C10	0.7910/676	
	C11	0.715/0.670	
	C12	0.785/0.514	
		Salary	
	C13	0.867/0.765	0.849/0.695
	C14	0.85/0.695	
na		Satisfaction with choice	
	D4	0.775/0.702	0.784/0.747
	D5	0.46/0.636	
	D6	0.747/0.737	
na		Social dissuasion	
	D1	0.669/0.682	0.666/0.723
	D2	0.825/0.679	
	D3	0.741/0.757	

IFI ≥ 0.90 (Byrne 2013, 50–128). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was subsequently performed on factors in both subscales to examine the differences and similarities between the two cohorts. SPSS version 24 was used for Cronbach's alpha, the reliability coefficient, inter-correlations and ANOVA, while factor analysis was performed with Amos.

Results

FIT-Choice construct validity

To answer the first research question, the divergent and convergent construct validity of the proposed model was evaluated separately for both cohorts through CFA. The overall goodness-of-fit for higher-order factors (task demand, task return, personal utility values and social utility values) with all sample data was evaluated first. The results showed a good fit: $\chi^2/df = 3.491$, RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.915, IFI = 0.915. Then, for non-volunteer participants, the model fit for the motivation scale was as follows: $\chi^2/df = 2.617$, RMSEA = 0.045, CFI = 0.937, IFI = 0.938, and, for the perception scale, it was as follows: $\chi^2/df = 4.558$, RMSEA = 0.066, CFI = 0.925, IFI = 0.925. For volunteer participants, the model fit for the motivation scale was as follows: $\chi^2/df = 1.559$, RMSEA = 0.053, CFI = 0.9, IFI = 0.903, and, for the perception scale, it was as follows: $\chi^2/df = 1.998$, RMSEA = 0.071, CFI = 0.880, IFI = 0.852. These results indicate a good fit of the CFA model to the sample data.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and differences between non-volunteer and volunteer student teachers.

Variable	Mean (non-volunteer/volunteer student teachers)	Std. Deviation	F	P
Motivations for teaching				
1. Ability	5.22/5.79	1.00/0.95	52.761	<.001
2. Intrinsic career value	5.32/5.94	1.11/1.02	52.402	<.001
3. Fallback career	3.98/3.67	1.31/1.59	8.198	0.004
4. Job security	5.45/5.55	0.99/1.087	1.717	0.19
5. Time for family	4.91/5.04	0.96/1.04	3.052	0.081
6. Job transferability	4.77/5.11	1.10/1.19	14.29	<.001
7. Shape future of children/adolescents	5.70/5.99	0.93/0.90	16.132	<.001
8. Enhance social equity	5.48/5.79	1.01/1.03	15.097	<.001
9. Make social contribution	5.66/6.05	0.98/0.86	27.862	<.001
10. Work with children/adolescents	5.32/5.83	1.12/1.038	34.347	<.001
11. Prior teaching and learning experiences	5.60/5.95	0.96/0.84	21.926	<.001
12. Social influence	4.55/5.19	1.27/1.23	40.283	<.001
Perception about teaching and satisfaction with choice				
13. Expertise	5.99/5.92	0.92/0.83	0.943	0.332
14. Difficulty	5.54/5.21	0.93/1.068	18.971	<.001
15. Social status	5.29/5.68	0.98/0.86	26.302	<.001
16. Salary	4.31/5.14	1.40/1.20	59.433	<.001
17. Social dissuasion	4.55/4.54	1.14/1.43	0.014	0.907
18. Satisfaction with choice	5.43/5.84	0.95/0.99	29.416	<.001

The factors that influence volunteer Student teachers' teaching choice

The results of the second research question show that the most influential factors for volunteer student teachers' choice are 'make social contribution' and 'shape future of children/adolescents' (Table 3). At the same time, the group rated 'fallback career' the lowest. With high intrinsic values, perceived teaching abilities and social utility values, volunteer student teachers are primary 'highly engaged persisters' (Richardson and Watt 2016). They view teaching as less demanding, but more rewarding compared to non-volunteers and report greater satisfaction with their career choice. Results from the last question 'Do you want to be a teacher after graduation?' showed that more volunteer student teachers (90.5%) than non-volunteers (70.9%) reported a desire to become a teacher after graduation.

The differing motivators of volunteer and non-volunteer Student teachers

As for the third research question, in general, volunteer student teachers rated all motivational factors higher than their non-volunteer counterparts except for 'fallback career' (Table 3). On the motivation scale, both non-volunteer and volunteer participants rated 'shape the future of children/adolescents', 'make a social contribution', and 'prior teaching and learning experiences' as the most influential factors. The lowest score for both groups was for 'fallback career'. ANOVA was performed to measure the difference between volunteer student teachers and non-volunteer student teachers. Regarding motivational factors, the ANOVA test revealed a significant difference between the two groups in their reasons for entering the profession ($F = 34.519$, $p < 0.01$) in all factors except 'job security' and 'time for family' (Table 3). Volunteer participants rated 'making a social contribution' the highest, while non-volunteers rated 'shaping the future of children/adolescents' the highest. On the perception and satisfaction scale, except for

'expertise" and "social dissuasion', a significant difference was found in all factors of the two groups' perception of the profession ($F = 14.411$, $p < 0.01$). Non-volunteer teachers rated 'salary' the lowest, while volunteers rated 'social dissuasion' the lowest. Meanwhile, volunteer student teachers were significantly more satisfied with their choice of becoming teachers than non-volunteers.

The importance of factors influencing student teachers' choice of the teaching profession can be determined using two criteria: 1) factor score means and 2) the relative strength of factor correlations with the 'satisfaction with choice' subscale since it can be considered as an outcome variable (Watt and Richardson 2007). Table 4 presents the correlations among the first-order latent constructs for each cohort. It is evident that most of the factors in the motivation and perception subscales are inter-correlated. For non-volunteer teachers, the factor displaying the strongest positive correlation with 'satisfaction with choice' is 'intrinsic career value' (0.617), followed by 'enhance social equity' (0.591) and 'work with children/adolescents' (0.589). For volunteer teachers, the strongest positive correlation with 'satisfaction with choice' was found for 'self-perceived ability' (0.708), followed by 'intrinsic career value' (0.697) and 'work with children/adolescents' (0.689). These factors also received the highest ratings in terms of score means, implying these are the most important factors influencing student teachers' choice of profession.

Discussion

For the volunteer and non-volunteer student teacher data in the present study, the results demonstrate an acceptable level of validity and reliability, indicating the effectiveness of FIT-Choice scale in understanding the motivation and career perceptions of Chinese volunteer student teachers. Hereafter, this discussion will first compare the findings with previous research and then examine the similarities and differences between the two cohorts regarding their teaching motivations, perceptions of teaching, and choice satisfaction.

Major motivators in comparison to previous studies

In the present study, the most influential factors for both cohorts were social utility factors: 'shape the future of children/adolescents' and 'make a social contribution'. This finding aligns with previous studies in China (Lin et al. 2012; Shang et al. 2022; Ye et al. 2021) and in other Asian countries (Kılınç, Watt, and Richardson 2012; Suryani 2020). By contrast, individualistic cultures like Australia and the US (Watt and Richardson 2012) tend to prioritise ability and intrinsic motivations. This could be attributed to how collective cultures tend to place more emphasis on social harmony and group success (Suryani 2020; Hofstede 2011) and make decisions collectively (Watt and Richardson 2012). Meanwhile, it is the norm for individuals to fulfil the expectations of others or exhibit a socially oriented achievement motivation (Markus and Kitayama 2014). In China, teachers are often seen as role models of selflessness, and volunteers are expected to possess high moral, selfless qualities (X. Gao 2015). Therefore, it is possible that the subjects answered the survey questions in a socially acceptable manner according to the 'pressures of accountability . . . in their professional roles' (X. Gao 2008, 157). What is more, even though Confucianism in Chinese culture has promoted benevolence and societal

Table 4. Correlations among first-order factors for volunteer and non-volunteer teachers.

Factors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1 Ability	1	.69**	0	.42**	.38**	.49**	.68**	.64**	.61**	.61**	.64**	.46**	.4**	.14	.61**	.44**	.71**	.09
2 Intrinsic career value	.68**	1	−.06	.20**	.24**	.32**	.62**	.6**	.63**	.72**	.63**	.4**	.35**	.07	.52**	.4**	.7**	.04
3 Fallback career	.03	−.15**	1	.18**	.49**	.35**	−.05	−.12	−.11	−.08	−.05	.34**	−.17*	.3**	.01	.27**	−.23**	.46**
4 Job security	.33**	.25**	.18**	1	.63**	.60**	.32**	.29**	.22**	.25**	.36**	.45**	.29**	.34**	.4**	.43**	.27**	.25**
5 Time for family	.42**	.32**	.33**	.60**	1	.67**	.22**	.2**	.17*	.24**	.26**	.53**	.11	.38**	.31**	.48**	.18**	.36**
6 Job transferability	.44**	.40**	.34**	.44**	.55**	1	.29**	.28**	.23**	.31**	.33**	.58**	.22**	.21**	.43**	.5**	.28**	.25**
7 Shape future of children/ adolescents	.59**	.62**	−.07*	.34**	.39**	.37**	1	.73**	.70**	.57**	.65**	.33**	.58**	.16*	.61**	.3**	.7**	.14*
8 Enhance social equity	.62**	.63**	0	.35**	.42**	.41**	.77**	1	.70**	.64**	.59**	.31**	.45**	.06	.54**	.25**	.64**	.09
9 Make social contribution	.60**	.63**	0	.32**	.38**	.41**	.76**	.79**	1	.61**	.59**	.28**	.42**	.08	.52**	.28**	.65**	.06
10 Work with children/adolescents	.63**	.74**	−.08*	.28**	.36**	.41**	.64**	.69**	.65**	1	.6**	.4**	.37**	.09	.49**	.33**	.6**	−.04
11 Prior teaching and learning experiences	.60**	.57**	−.07*	.36**	.35**	.38**	.65**	.61**	.63**	.56**	1	.38**	.51**	.15*	.55**	.27**	.65**	.15*
12 Social influence	.413**	.39**	.32**	.38**	.49**	.56**	.32**	.34**	.32**	.37**	.33**	1	.16*	.21**	.34**	.42**	.26**	.23**
13 Expertise	.35**	.31**	−.06	.28**	.25**	.16**	.45**	.46**	.44**	.33**	.44**	.11**	1	.31**	.56**	.29**	.57**	0.11
14 Difficulty	.19**	.10**	.17**	.35**	.3**	.15**	.27**	.24**	.24**	.15**	.24**	.12**	.53**	1	.34**	.32**	.17*	.42**
15 Social status	.43**	.44**	.07*	.4**	.4**	.44**	.43**	.49**	.48**	.4**	.45**	.38**	.47**	.26**	1	.56**	.67**	.18*
16 Salary	.30**	.31**	.17**	.25**	.34**	.43**	.19**	.24**	.21**	.29**	.21**	.39**	.1**	−0.02	.52**	1	.38**	.16*
17 Satisfaction with choice	.53**	.62**	−.17**	.31**	.28**	.29**	.55**	.59**	.56**	.59**	.48**	.26**	.49**	.3**	.59**	.36**	1	.04
18 Social dissuasion	.15**	0	.33**	.15**	.27**	.22**	.11**	.12**	.08*	.14**	.08*	.2**	.11**	.33**	.09*	.21**	.12**	1

$p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. Note. Above the diagonal is data for volunteer student teachers, below is data for non-volunteer student teachers.

kindness (Solé-Farràs 2008), the pragmatism in the culture contributed to the relatively low intrinsic values, which means volunteering could be regarded as a means of personal advancement and social mobility (X. Gao 2010). This complex blend of altruism and self-interest is a defining characteristic of volunteer student teachers' motivation.

It is worth noting that the findings of the present research, in line with other more recent studies (e.g. Ye et al. 2021), contrast with earlier work, which tends to emphasise extrinsic factors such as social status, low college entrance exam scores, and financial incentives as the primary motivators for teaching in China (X. Gao 2010; Liu 2010). This shift in the past decade may be attributed to policy changes in education. The first decade of the 21st century witnessed concerted efforts from the Chinese government and society to increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession (Feng 2012), with improved working conditions and an inclusive Teacher Certification System (J. Zhou and Reed 2005). However, changes in free master's degree policies, lower governmental incentives, and the declining social status of teaching (Guo 2022) have reduced the number of individuals drawn to the profession by extrinsic motives.

Characteristics of volunteer Student Teacher motivation

Both volunteer and non-volunteer student teachers are primarily driven by social utility values, but volunteer student teachers prioritise broader social contributions, such as promoting social equity, while non-volunteers focus more on shaping the future of children and adolescents. It has been proven that volunteers' motivation is characterised by altruism and social responsibility (Clary et al. 1998), especially in collective cultures that emphasise a 'we-consciousness' over an 'I-consciousness' (Hofstede 2011, 11). At the same time, the civic engagement experience of volunteering provided meaningful opportunities for structured reflection (Castellan 2012), fostering in student teachers a motivation that extends beyond self-interest towards pursuing a greater social impact.

In addition, 'equality and rightness' are core values of Chinese moral education. With its vision of alleviating poverty and achieving common wealth for all, the government encourages young people to 'go to where the country needs them the most' (Qiao and A'rong 2008, 42) to achieve their dreams as a part of the country's common dream. As such, it is unsurprising that social utility factors are rated significantly higher by volunteer student teachers. Moreover, they are more motivated by intrinsic factors and perceive themselves as having higher teaching ability compared to non-volunteers. They can be categorised as 'highly engaged persisters' according to Richardson and Watt (2016), suggesting high engagement and commitment to the profession.

By contrast, the invariant ratings of 'fallback career' show that volunteer teachers share the same 'reluctance' as non-volunteers. The pragmatic perspective mentioned above can explain volunteer teachers' choices, as preferential status is conferred to volunteers in the civil service and postgraduate exams (Qiao and A'rong 2008). Similarly, volunteer student teachers expected more job transferability in their internship since volunteering usually happens in unfamiliar, culturally distinct environments. This echoes with the 'volunteer teaching tourism' mentioned by Wu, Fu, and Kang (2018) highlighting that passion for travel motivates Chinese students to engage in short-term volunteer teaching. As mentioned before, the volunteers' motivation is not purely altruistic. Therefore, volunteer

teaching projects, particularly those used as teacher training initiatives, should be approached with a more critical perspective.

Demand and return of teaching profession

In line with previous research, non-volunteer student teachers considered teaching a challenging job with heavy workloads and high emotional pressure (Shang et al. 2022). By contrast, despite often teaching in resource-poor rural schools, volunteer student teachers perceived a lower 'task demand' (expertise and difficulty) and higher 'task return' (social status and salary) than their non-volunteer counterparts. This may be due to the lighter workload assigned to volunteer teachers in most volunteering programmes and a good relationship with the local community in volunteering. In addition, volunteers' sense of social responsibility helps them manage and overcome hardships (Qiao and A'rong 2008). Furthermore, volunteer teachers perceived teaching as a profession with a high social status and salary which may be because they are more respected than non-volunteers with their personal sacrifice spirit for the common good. Similarly, due to their altruistic spirit, volunteer teachers perceive teaching as a highly paid occupation even though their salaries are average for civil servants (OECD 2016). These findings demonstrate how integrating teaching experiences with service learning can transform students into active partners within the community, providing them with an emotional buffer.

The invariant difference in 'social dissuasion' between the two groups, indicating that, overall, teaching was not a highly recommended career in China. Even though teachers are highly respected, education in China is often considered a means to other ends, and recent socio-cultural changes have further increased the complexity of the situation (Ye et al. 2021). For example, qualifications and promotion in the profession have become more challenging (OECD 2016). The 'Double Reduction' policy (Guo 2022) implemented in 2021 further limits job opportunities in off-campus education institutions, where teachers receive higher pay and greater flexibility. Combined with the reduced policy incentives mentioned earlier, individuals are more hesitant to pursue a career in teaching.

Satisfaction with the choice of teaching

Volunteer student teachers are most satisfied with the choices of teaching when they believe they possess the required ability for the profession. As a reinforcing cycle, service learning helps improve their self-efficacy and commitment through the experiences gained from volunteering (X. Gao 2015; Saeed and Ahmed 2021). The perception of having the capacity to exert a positive impact through the altruistic service greatly enhances the job satisfaction of volunteer student teachers, thereby increasing their willingness to remain in the profession. As reported, the 'task demand' perceived by both cohorts correlated positively with satisfaction, which suggests that 'task demand' may act as a motivator for teachers when choosing the profession, especially for those who desire self-advancement in challenging situations (X. Gao 2015). This could be attributed to student teachers internalising culturally grounded beliefs (Eccles and Wigfield 2020), where their teacher identity is shaped by cultural values, norms, and interactions. Student teachers have high expectations of themselves in their career, stemming from societal pressures and expectations on teachers in Chinese culture.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to investigate the motivations to choose a career in teaching among volunteer student teachers in China. Volunteer teaching not only serves as a temporary remedy for educational disparities in rural areas but also influences student teachers' satisfaction and motivation of teaching as a career. Despite its significance, research on this particular group remains scarce. To the best of our knowledge, the findings presented in this article are among the first to address this issue comprehensively. This study provides an in-depth analysis of this often-overlooked cohort from both socio-cultural and psychological perspectives, emphasising how volunteering experiences can both foster and enhance student teachers' motivation and satisfaction in entering and persisting in the teaching profession.

This research found that the most influential motivator for student teachers in China was social utility values, implying the influence of collective values and a pragmatic spirit in Chinese culture. Volunteer student teachers primarily differ from their peers in their desire to effectuate a significant social impact, such as contributing to societal advancement and enhancing equity. The civic engagement in the community provided them with an emotional buffer that allowed them to perceive the teaching profession as having relatively low demands but yielding high returns in terms of social status and salary. However, our findings also reveal a complex interplay of altruism and self-interest in their motivations, shaped by the collective culture and recent societal and educational policy changes in China. Notably, the invariance in the ratings of 'social dissuasion' and 'fallback career' for both groups underscores the current challenges and declining attractiveness of teaching in China.

Despite this, the experience of volunteer teaching enabled student teachers critically to reflect on their career choices and community roles, fostering their development into 'highly engaged persisters'. This reflective process enhanced their satisfaction and increased their commitment to remaining in the profession. The inherent beyond-self nature of volunteering motivated them to accomplish something meaningful to the self and the world, which Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) defined as life purpose. Motivated by this sense of purpose, volunteer teaching emerges as a promising alternative teacher training method to enhance satisfaction and commitment among pre-service and novice teachers, critical amidst global teacher shortages.

Nevertheless, quantitative data only are insufficient to adequately comprehend the impact of service learning on student teachers. The next phase of this project will delve into the inner voices of volunteer teachers, aiming to unravel how volunteer experiences shape their teacher identity and life purpose. This paper calls for more attention on volunteer student teachers to foster a more nuanced and detailed comprehension of the influence of service learning in the future teacher education.

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