The Essence of "Boosting Morale": A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Out-of-Field Science Teachers in an Online Community of Practice

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ABSTRACT:
This study explored the essence of boosting morale as experienced by out-of-field science teachers participating in an online Community of Practice. Guided by Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology and the analytic procedures illustrated by Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004), the study was conducted as a second-phase phenomenological inquiry that isolated morale enhancement as a distinct phenomenon emerging from a broader qualitative investigation. Five out-of-field science teachers participated in post-intervention, semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed through epoché, horizonalization, phenomenological reduction, clustering of invariant constituents, and the synthesis of composite textural and structural descriptions.

The findings revealed that participants experienced boosting morale as a gradual reconstruction of professional confidence through three interrelated experiential structures: validation of the teaching self, recognition of a shared professional condition, and confirmation of capability through enacted practice. The synthesis of these structures revealed that boosting morale was not merely an increase in confidence but a relational and transformative experience constituted through affirmation, belonging, and successful teaching practice within a supportive professional community.

The study contributes to the literature on teacher professional development by demonstrating that Communities of Practice foster not only instructional competence but also the lived reconstruction of professional confidence among out-of-field teachers. Methodologically, the study illustrates the value of transcendental phenomenology in uncovering dimensions of teacher development that remain insufficiently explained through outcome-oriented approaches.

Keywords: transcendental phenomenology; community of practice; out-of-field teachers; morale; teacher confidence

Introduction

Education plays a critical role in national development, particularly through the advancement of science education, which equips learners with the capacity to engage in scientific inquiry and problem-solving (Annisa & Laksono, 2021; Emendu, 2014; Rahayu, 2017). However, despite its recognized importance, the Philippines continues to face significant challenges in science education, as reflected in declining performance in international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2023). These concerns have been linked to systemic issues including curriculum implementation, resource limitations, and, most critically, the quality and preparation of teachers (OECD, 2023; PBED, 2023).

Teacher quality is widely acknowledged as a central determinant of student learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2005; Wulansari et al., 2020). However, in many contexts, including Western Mindanao, the shortage of specialized science teachers has led to the widespread practice of out-of-field teaching, wherein educators are assigned to teach subjects outside their area of expertise (Co et al., 2021; Hobbs et al., 2022; Luft et al., 2020). This condition has been associated with diminished instructional quality, reduced student engagement, and lower academic achievement (Aquino et al., 2022; Caldis, 2017). More importantly, it significantly affects teachers themselves, particularly in terms of their confidence, professional identity, and emotional well-being (Abella & De Jesus, 2021; Mizzi, 2019; Modirkhamene & Hassanzad, 2022).

Out-of-field teachers (OFTs) commonly report challenges such as insufficient content knowledge, lack of pedagogical preparation, and the need to invest additional time in lesson preparation (Abaño et al., 2021; Talili et al., 2021). These limitations contribute to feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and professional dissatisfaction, which ultimately influence their teaching efficacy and classroom practices (Mizzi, 2019). The literature further suggests that teachers' self-efficacy, or belief in their capability to perform teaching tasks effectively, is a critical factor in determining their persistence, instructional decisions, and responsiveness to challenges (Bandura, 1997; Klassen & Tze, 2014; Seung et al., 2023). Teachers with low self-efficacy are more likely to avoid demanding tasks and experience heightened anxiety, while those with higher self-efficacy demonstrate resilience and adaptability (George et al., 2018; Pfitzner-Eden, 2016; Saadat et al., 2022).

In response to these challenges, professional development initiatives have been implemented to support teachers' growth. However, existing programs have often been criticized for being too general, short-term, or misaligned with teachers' specific needs, particularly for OFTs who require targeted support in both content and pedagogy (Molina et al., 2018; Pobre, 2022). Moreover, teachers in smaller or remote schools frequently experience professional isolation, limiting their access to subject-specific mentorship and collaborative learning opportunities (Orbe et al., 2018).

Within this context, the community of practice (CoP) has emerged as a promising approach to teacher professional development. Grounded in social learning theory, CoPs emphasize participation, shared experiences, and collaborative knowledge construction among individuals with common interests (Lave & Wenger, 1991; de Paiva Duarte, 2013). Studies have demonstrated that CoPs can enhance teachers' pedagogical practices, facilitate knowledge sharing, and improve self-efficacy (Kelley et al., 2020; Marques et al., 2015; Tsai et al., 2010). The integration of digital platforms has further enabled the development of virtual communities of practice (vCoPs), which provide flexible, accessible, and scalable opportunities for professional learning (Ekici, 2017; Schwarzhaupt et al., 2021).

Online CoPs, particularly those facilitated through social media platforms such as Facebook, have been shown to support teacher collaboration, reflective practice, and resource exchange (Goodyear et al., 2019; Lantz-Andersson, 2017; Wong et al., 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2020). Beyond cognitive and pedagogical

benefits, these communities also offer emotional and psychological support, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing feelings of isolation among teachers . Such relational dimensions are especially critical for OFTs, whose professional experiences are often characterized by uncertainty and lack of support.

Amid these documented benefits of Communities of Practice, participants in the broader investigation repeatedly described experiences using expressions such as "my morale was boosted," "I became more confident," "I now have someone to ask," and "I realized I can do it." The recurrence of these expressions suggested more than positive evaluations of the virtual Community of Practice. Rather, they pointed toward a shared human experience that appeared to extend beyond improved content knowledge, pedagogical competence, or increased self-efficacy.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that Communities of Practice enhance teachers' professional learning, collaboration, instructional competence, and confidence (Marques et al., 2015; Kelley et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2010). Likewise, virtual Communities of Practice facilitate knowledge sharing, professional connectedness, mentoring, and emotional support (Goodyear et al., 2019; Ekici, 2017; Schwarzhaupt et al., 2021; Ghamrawi, 2022). For out-of-field teachers, these communities provide access to expertise, instructional resources, and collegial support that are often unavailable within their schools (Jocius et al., 2022; Roth & Lee, 2004). Existing scholarship has also consistently shown that teacher self-efficacy, confidence, and professional identity improve through collaborative professional learning (Bandura, 1997; Klassen & Tze, 2014; Shin & You, 2021).

Despite these contributions, previous investigations have largely conceptualized these changes as measurable outcomes of professional development or as psychological constructs. Likewise, studies examining teacher morale have predominantly associated morale with job satisfaction, organizational climate, well-being, motivation, resilience, and teacher retention rather than exploring its lived meaning. Consequently, while the literature explains that teachers become more confident through professional learning communities, it provides limited understanding of how teachers experience this transformation or what they mean when they repeatedly describe that their morale has been "boosted."

This distinction is particularly significant for out-of-field science teachers. Previous research consistently portrays these teachers as experiencing uncertainty, inadequate disciplinary preparation, professional isolation, and diminished confidence (Hobbs et al., 2022; Luft et al., 2020; Mizzi, 2019). Although professional development initiatives attempt to address these challenges through knowledge enhancement and pedagogical support, considerably less attention has been devoted to understanding the lived process through which teachers reconstruct confidence, reinterpret their professional identity, and experience renewed morale.

Consistent with the philosophical orientation of transcendental phenomenology, Moustakas (1994) argued that phenomenological inquiry seeks to describe the essential meaning of a phenomenon as consciously experienced by those who have lived it. Similarly, Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) demonstrated that when a recurring experience repeatedly emerges within a broader qualitative inquiry, the experience itself may constitute a distinct phenomenon worthy of transcendental phenomenological investigation. Rather than treating participants' recurring expressions merely as indicators of successful intervention, the present study isolates boosting morale as the phenomenon of interest in order to understand its essential structure as experienced by out-of-field science teachers participating in a virtual Community of Practice.

The present study is therefore positioned as a second-phase phenomenological inquiry arising from a broader investigation of out-of-field science teachers' experiences in a virtual Community of Practice. While the initial inquiry examined participants' overall experiences of the intervention, the repeated expressions of "my

morale was boosted," "I became more confident," "I now have someone to ask," and "I realized I can do it" revealed a distinct phenomenon that warranted further exploration. Following the logic of Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004), the recurring articulation of these experiences prompted a focused transcendental phenomenological inquiry to uncover the essential meaning and invariant structures of boosting morale as lived by the participants. Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention, the present study seeks to describe the essence of this phenomenon as consciously experienced by out-of-field science teachers participating in the virtual Community of Practice.

Accordingly, this study was guided by the following phenomenological question: What is the essence of "boosting morale" as experienced by out-of-field science teachers participating in an online Community of Practice?

By describing the essential structure of this phenomenon, the study contributes to the growing literature on teacher professional development by illuminating an aspect of teachers' experiences that cannot be adequately understood through outcome measures alone. Rather than conceptualizing morale simply as an indicator of confidence or professional growth, the study reveals how morale is experienced, interpreted, and constituted within a supportive professional community.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed transcendental phenomenology following the philosophical orientation of Moustakas (1994) to uncover the essential meaning of boosting morale as experienced by out-of-field science teachers participating in an online Community of Practice. Transcendental phenomenology seeks to describe a phenomenon as consciously experienced by individuals while suspending the researcher's prior assumptions through epoché, thereby allowing the essence of the experience to emerge from participants' descriptions. The study further followed the analytic procedures illustrated by Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) and was conducted as a second-phase phenomenological inquiry, isolating the phenomenon of boosting morale from a broader qualitative investigation on teachers' experiences in a virtual Community of Practice. This approach was appropriate because the recurring expressions of "boosted morale," "boosted confidence," and similar descriptions indicated a distinct shared experience warranting phenomenological exploration.

Research Context

The study emerged from a broader professional development intervention that established an online Community of Practice through a private Facebook group designed to support out-of-field science teachers. The virtual Community of Practice provided opportunities for collaborative learning, sharing of instructional resources, professional dialogue, mentoring, and reflective discussions among participants. Throughout the intervention, teachers engaged in continuous interaction, exchanged classroom experiences, and sought support from fellow educators and invited experts. During the broader investigation, participants repeatedly described experiences using expressions such as "my morale was boosted," "I became more confident," and "I realized I can do it." The recurrence of these expressions prompted the present second-phase transcendental phenomenological inquiry, which focused specifically on understanding the essential meaning of boosting morale.

Participants

Participants were selected through criterion purposive sampling based on their direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) be public secondary school teachers assigned to teach science outside their field of specialization, (b) have completed participation in the online Community of Practice intervention, and (c) have expressed experiences related to morale enhancement during the broader investigation. Five participants met these criteria and consented to participate in the phenomenological interviews. In transcendental

phenomenology, participants are selected for the richness of their lived experiences rather than representativeness, making the sample appropriate for uncovering the essential structure of the phenomenon.

Table 1 Participants' background information.

Participant	Teaching Assignment	Science Teaching Context	Initial Experience Before vCoP
Teacher 1	Out-of-field science teacher	No science mentor	Low confidence; relied on self-learning
Teacher 2	Out-of-field science teacher	Newly assigned to science	Professional isolation and lack of resources
Teacher 3	Out-of-field science teacher	Limited science preparation	Anxiety teaching chemistry and unfamiliar topics
Teacher 4	Beginning out-of-field science teacher	Limited teaching experience	Needed instructional guidance and collaboration
Teacher 5	Out-of-field science teacher	No formal science specialization	Hesitant and uncertain about science teaching

Data Collection

Data were collected through post-intervention semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed descriptions of participants' lived experiences of boosting morale. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions encouraging participants to reflect on how participation in the online Community of Practice influenced their perceptions of themselves as science teachers. Follow-up probing questions were used to clarify meanings and encourage deeper reflection. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and checked for transcription accuracy before analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, ethical principles governing research involving human participants were observed. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms (Teacher 1–Teacher 5), and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts used for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed following the transcendental phenomenological procedures proposed by Moustakas (1994) and demonstrated by Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004). Analysis began with epoché, during which the researcher consciously bracketed prior assumptions and experiences related to the intervention. This was followed by horizonalization, where each significant statement relevant to the experience of boosting morale was initially treated as having equal value. Through phenomenological reduction, repetitive, overlapping, and non-essential statements were eliminated, resulting in the identification of invariant constituents. These constituents were

subsequently clustered according to their shared meanings.

Following phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation was undertaken to examine the structural conditions that made the experience possible. By viewing the invariant constituents from multiple perspectives, the analysis identified the contextual and relational structures underlying the phenomenon, leading to the development of the composite structural description. Finally, the composite textural description, composite structural description, and synthesis of meanings and essences were integrated to reveal the essential nature of boosting morale as experienced by the participants.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor of this transcendental phenomenological inquiry, the study established trustworthiness following the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the participants during the broader online Community of Practice intervention, enabling the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences prior to the phenomenological interviews. Member checking was conducted by returning interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations to the participants to verify the accuracy of their accounts and ensure that the findings faithfully represented their lived experiences. Rich, verbatim quotations were likewise incorporated throughout the findings to preserve participants' voices and strengthen the authenticity of the phenomenological descriptions.

Dependability was established by maintaining a systematic audit trail documenting each stage of the research process, including participant recruitment, data collection, transcription, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. The consistency of the analytical procedures was further enhanced through adherence to the transcendental phenomenological framework of Moustakas (1994) and the analytic sequence demonstrated by Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004).

Confirmability was supported through the practice of epoché and continuous reflexive journaling, allowing the researcher to consciously bracket personal assumptions, prior knowledge, and experiences related to the broader intervention throughout the analysis. In addition, peer debriefing with qualitative research experts was undertaken to review the coding process, invariant constituents, and thematic clustering, thereby minimizing researcher bias and strengthening the objectivity of the findings.

Transferability was addressed through the provision of thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and the phenomenological findings. Detailed descriptions of the online Community of Practice, participant characteristics, and the composite textural and structural descriptions allow readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational contexts involving out-of-field teachers and collaborative professional learning environments.

Results And Discussion

Epoche

The phenomenological reduction began with epoché as reflected in the systematic process detailed in Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004), consistent with the transcendental phenomenology of Moustakas (1994). This stage involves the researcher placing aside preconceptions or assumptions and returning to observe the phenomenon of "boosting morale" as it was experienced and described by the participants. The analysis was conducted with the actual words expressed by the participant, thus the interpretations and meanings are extracted from the data and not from the preconceived notions of what it should resemble for the researcher. Participant comments about the benefits of the vCoP and positive comments about the community during the intervention may lead the researcher to expect a positive change in the confidence and morale of the teachers involved.

These preconceptions were bracketed through an ongoing reflexive practice process occurring prior to and during data analysis. Preconceived notions of the success of the intervention, expectations of improved teacher confidence, and information gained from the previous phase of the overall study were set aside. This meant analysis relied on participants' verbatim expressions and meanings were allowed to emerge from the data, not from the researcher's prior knowledge or assumptions of what this phenomenon should look like.

Horizonalization

Following epoché, horizonalization was undertaken by reviewing each interview transcript line-by-line to identify statements that directly described the lived experience of "boosting morale." Consistent with Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological reduction, every relevant statement was initially regarded as possessing equal value before repetitive, overlapping, and non-essential expressions were removed. This process allowed the experience to emerge from the participants' own descriptions rather than from predetermined interpretations.

Across the five interviews, participants consistently described experiences of renewed confidence, reassurance, professional validation, shared understanding, access to support, and successful classroom implementation. Although expressed in different ways, these accounts revealed striking similarities in how morale was experienced within the virtual Community of Practice.

The following significant statements illustrate the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon:

> *"I now have someone to ask whenever I do not understand the lesson."*
>
> *"I felt confident to teach the subject."*
>
> *"The group really has a great impact on me."*
>
> *"When I ask something, there is someone willing to answer."*
>
> *"Science Teaching Buddies has a big impact on me."*
>
> *"I now feel confident."*
>
> *"I already have the confidence to face my students."*
>
> *"The pressure and challenges became lighter."*
>
> *"The community helped us solve the struggles in teaching science."*
>
> *"Teachers are willing to help one another."*
>
> *"The invited expert really helped me."*
>
> *"My ideas were appreciated."*
>
> *"Our confidence is no longer as low as before."*
>
> *"This community really supported us."*
>
> *"There were many moments when I realized, 'So this is how it should be done.'"*

The statements present only a portion of the significant expressions identified during horizonalization. Across the interview transcripts, there was repetition of utterances relating to gaining confidence, receiving affirmation, obtaining timely instructional support, recognizing shared professional struggles, and successfully applying newly acquired knowledge in their teaching practice. These recurring expressions throughout the transcripts helped to shed some light on the phenomenon of boosting morale and provided the basis for the phenomenological reduction. Following Moustakas' (1994) approach, overlapping and repetitive statements were subsequently clustered into invariant meaning units that conveyed the common essential meaning shared across participants.

Reduction and Elimination

Following horizonalization, each significant statement was examined using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological reduction process to determine whether it represented an essential component of the experience. Statements were retained only if they contained a necessary and sufficient meaning that contributed to understanding the phenomenon of boosting morale. Repetitive expressions, overlapping descriptions, and statements unrelated to the experience of morale enhancement were eliminated.

For example, several participants repeatedly described improvements in content knowledge, teaching strategies, and instructional materials. Although these experiences were important outcomes of the intervention, they were retained only when participants explicitly described them as contributing to increased confidence, reassurance, or morale. Likewise, repetitive expressions such as "it helped me," "it was useful," and similar statements were merged into broader experiential meanings when they reflected the same underlying experience.

This process resulted in a refined set of invariant constituents that represented the essential meanings shared across participants while remaining faithful to their descriptions of boosting morale.

Following phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation was undertaken to examine the underlying structural conditions that made the experience of boosting morale possible. Through this process, the invariant constituents were viewed from multiple perspectives to identify the contextual and relational structures that informed the composite structural description.

Invariant Constituents

Following phenomenological reduction, the significant statements were examined to identify the invariant constituents of the experience. Consistent with Moustakas (1994), only statements that were both necessary and sufficient for understanding the phenomenon of boosting morale were retained, while repetitive and overlapping expressions were removed. Rather than representing isolated incidents, the remaining constituents reflected recurring experiential meanings shared across participants.

Across the five participants, morale enhancement was consistently described through experiences of being acknowledged as capable teachers, recognizing that their struggles were shared by others, and gradually developing confidence through successful teaching experiences. Participants repeatedly described moments in which encouragement from fellow teachers, reassurance that support was available, and recognition of their own instructional success transformed their perceptions of themselves as out-of-field science teachers.

These invariant constituents suggest that boosting morale was experienced not as a single emotional event but as an evolving process in which participants reconstructed their professional confidence through interaction with others and through the successful enactment of their teaching practice.

The invariant constituents were subsequently clustered according to their shared experiential meanings. This process yielded three meaning structures that collectively described the phenomenon of boosting morale: Validation of the Teaching Self, Recognition of a Shared Professional Condition, and Confirmation of Capability Through Enacted Practice. These clusters do not represent separate stages of the experience; rather, they are interrelated structures that together constitute the lived experience of morale enhancement.

The first cluster, Validation of the Teaching Self, emerged from participants' descriptions of being acknowledged, encouraged, and reassured by members of the virtual Community of Practice. Expressions such as "they appreciated my idea," "I felt assured," and "I already have confidence facing my students" illustrate how external affirmation gradually became internal evidence of capability. Participants no longer viewed themselves primarily through the lens of their out-of-field assignment but began to perceive themselves as competent educators capable of teaching science effectively.

The second cluster, Recognition of a Shared Professional Condition, captures participants' realization that their struggles were not unique. Through interactions within the community, they encountered teachers who experienced similar uncertainties, instructional difficulties, and professional challenges. Statements such as "I now have someone to ask," "teachers are willing to help," and "I am not alone" reflect how recognizing shared experiences reduced feelings of professional isolation and fostered a sense of belonging. This collective understanding enabled

participants to reinterpret their difficulties as part of a broader professional reality rather than as indicators of personal inadequacy.

The third cluster, Confirmation of Capability Through Enacted Practice, represents the experiential validation that occurred when participants successfully applied newly learned ideas in their own classrooms. Confidence was strengthened not merely because teachers received encouragement but because they observed positive outcomes after implementing what they had learned. Descriptions such as "I tried it and it worked," "the pressure became lighter," and "I realized I can do it" illustrate how successful classroom practice served as concrete confirmation of their developing capability. Through repeated enactment, participants' confidence became increasingly grounded in their own lived experiences rather than solely in external affirmation.

Together, these three meaning structures reveal that the experience of boosting morale was constituted through the continuous interaction between affirmation from others, recognition of shared professional experiences, and successful engagement in teaching practice. Rather than functioning independently, each structure reinforced the others, collectively shaping the participants' transformation from uncertainty toward renewed professional confidence.

What Was Experienced

The composite textural description synthesizes the common experiences shared across all participants and answers the phenomenological question of what was experienced. The participants described the experience of boosting morale as a gradual transformation in how they perceived themselves as out-of-field science teachers. Before joining the virtual Community of Practice, they commonly experienced uncertainty, hesitation, and diminished confidence arising from teaching science outside their area of specialization. Several participants recalled relying primarily on self-study and internet resources while simultaneously questioning the correctness of their own understanding. As one participant admitted, "When I asked myself, did they understand? Even I doubted if what I was teaching was correct." Another participant shared that difficult science lessons were sometimes postponed or minimized because of uncertainty in teaching them.

As participation in the Community of Practice continued, participants experienced a noticeable shift in how they understood themselves as teachers. They repeatedly described moments in which encouragement from fellow teachers, acknowledgement of their ideas, and the willingness of others to respond to their questions strengthened their confidence. One participant reflected, "I now have someone to ask if I do not know anything about this lesson," while another emphasized, "Teachers are really willing to help." These experiences were not simply interpreted as receiving assistance; rather, they represented an emerging realization that they no longer faced the challenges of out-of-field teaching alone.

Participants likewise described morale enhancement as occurring when their own teaching practices were recognized and valued by the community. Sharing classroom experiences and receiving positive responses from fellow members allowed them to reinterpret their own capabilities. One participant recalled, "My ideas were appreciated," while another explained that reading encouraging comments after sharing a classroom innovation made them realize that their work was meaningful to other teachers. These experiences of affirmation enabled participants to move beyond viewing themselves primarily as non-specialists and instead perceive themselves as capable contributors to science teaching.

The experience further deepened when participants successfully implemented ideas encountered within the community. Several described immediately applying newly learned strategies in their classrooms and observing positive responses from students. One participant reflected, "Whatever I learned from the group, I directly applied it to my class," whereas another simply stated, "I realized I can

do it." Such experiences provided tangible confirmation that they were capable of teaching science effectively. Consequently, boosting morale was experienced not as a single emotional response but as an evolving sense of confidence reinforced through affirmation, shared understanding, and successful teaching practice.

How the Experience Occurred

The composite structural description describes how the experience of boosting morale came into being by identifying the contextual and relational conditions through which the phenomenon was experienced. The experience of boosting morale unfolded through sustained participation in a virtual professional community characterized by openness, reciprocity, and shared professional understanding. Rather than emerging solely from the acquisition of scientific knowledge or instructional strategies, participants' confidence developed because the community created conditions that enabled them to reinterpret their experiences as out-of-field teachers.

A central condition shaping this experience was the existence of a psychologically safe environment. Participants consistently described the community as a space where uncertainties could be expressed without fear of criticism or embarrassment. Questions that previously remained unasked within their own schools became opportunities for collaborative learning, allowing participants to receive reassurance while maintaining a sense of professional dignity. This environment transformed asking for assistance from a sign of inadequacy into an accepted practice of professional growth.

The visibility of others' experiences likewise played a significant role in shaping morale. Through discussions, shared classroom experiences, and interactions within the community, participants encountered teachers facing similar instructional struggles. Recognizing these common experiences allowed them to reinterpret their own difficulties as characteristic of the broader realities of out-of-field teaching rather than as evidence of personal incompetence. Feelings of isolation gradually gave way to a sense of belonging within a professional community that understood their circumstances.

Reciprocal interaction further strengthened this experience. Participants were not merely recipients of support but gradually became contributors who shared classroom practices, responded to colleagues, and encouraged other members. This reciprocity transformed the community into a space where professional identity was continually negotiated through mutual affirmation and collaborative engagement. As participants experienced both giving and receiving support, their confidence became increasingly grounded in shared professional relationships.

Finally, the opportunity to immediately apply newly acquired ideas within authentic classroom settings enabled participants to confirm their developing confidence through lived experience. Successful implementation of strategies discussed within the community provided experiential evidence that they could effectively teach science despite teaching outside their specialization. These successful teaching experiences reinforced the confidence initially nurtured through social interaction, allowing morale to become both relationally constructed and personally validated.

Essence of the Experience of "Boosting Morale"

The synthesis of the composite textural and structural descriptions revealed that boosting morale is the lived experience of reconstructing professional confidence through meaningful participation in a supportive Community of Practice. Rather than emerging solely from acquiring scientific knowledge or improving instructional competence, morale developed through an evolving process in which participants experienced affirmation from fellow teachers, recognized that their professional struggles were shared, and confirmed their own capability through successful classroom practice.

For these out-of-field science teachers, boosting morale represented more than feeling encouraged or becoming more confident. It signified a transformation in how they perceived themselves as science teachers. Through continuous

interaction within the virtual Community of Practice, participants gradually moved from uncertainty, hesitation, and perceived inadequacy toward a renewed sense of professional capability. Their confidence was nurtured through relationships that validated their experiences, fostered a sense of belonging, and provided opportunities to enact newly learned practices successfully.

The essence of boosting morale therefore lies not in the acquisition of knowledge alone but in the lived experience of becoming a capable teacher through shared professional relationships. Confidence emerged as both socially nurtured and experientially confirmed, revealing morale as a relational and transformative phenomenon grounded in affirmation, belonging, and successful teaching practice.

The present study extends current understandings of teacher professional development by revealing that the value of an online Community of Practice extends beyond its role as a venue for collaborative learning and knowledge exchange. Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that Communities of Practice strengthen teacher collaboration, instructional competence, professional learning, and self-efficacy (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Kelley et al., 2020; Marques et al., 2015). Likewise, virtual Communities of Practice have been shown to facilitate professional connectedness, knowledge sharing, and emotional support while reducing teachers' sense of professional isolation (Ekici, 2017; Goodyear et al., 2019; Schwarzhaupt et al., 2021). The present findings build upon this literature by demonstrating that these collaborative environments also provide the relational conditions through which teachers consciously reconstruct their confidence and professional identity.

The findings further enrich Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy. While participants' experiences reflected mastery experiences, social persuasion, and vicarious learning as important sources of confidence, the phenomenological analysis revealed that these were not experienced as isolated psychological processes. Instead, participants described confidence as emerging through the continuous interaction between affirmation from colleagues, recognition of shared professional experiences, and successful implementation of teaching practices. Thus, the experience of boosting morale illustrates how efficacy beliefs are consciously lived within collaborative professional relationships rather than existing solely as individual cognitive judgments.

The study likewise contributes to the literature on out-of-field science teachers. Previous investigations have consistently documented the uncertainty, diminished confidence, inadequate disciplinary preparation, and professional isolation experienced by teachers assigned outside their specialization (Hobbs et al., 2022; Luft et al., 2020; Mizzi, 2019). While earlier studies have primarily emphasized the challenges confronting these teachers, the present inquiry illuminates how they experience movement beyond these difficulties. Participants' repeated expressions of "I now have someone to ask," "my ideas were appreciated," and "I realized I can do it" demonstrate that morale enhancement was fundamentally relational, emerging through sustained participation in a professional community where teachers experienced affirmation, belonging, and mutual support.

More importantly, the findings broaden existing conceptions of teacher morale. Previous scholarship has commonly examined morale in relation to organizational climate, job satisfaction, teacher well-being, motivation, resilience, and retention. The present study suggests that morale may also be understood as a lived professional experience constituted through meaningful interaction with colleagues and successful engagement in teaching practice. By uncovering the essential structure of boosting morale, this study demonstrates that morale is not merely an outcome of professional development but an evolving process through which teachers reconstruct their professional identity and confidence.

From a methodological perspective, the study also demonstrates the value of transcendental

phenomenology for educational research. By following Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological procedures and the analytical orientation illustrated by Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004), the study moved beyond identifying themes or evaluating intervention outcomes to describe the essential meaning of a shared human experience. This phenomenological perspective offers a deeper understanding of teacher development by revealing dimensions of professional growth that remain inaccessible through variable-based or outcome-oriented approaches.

Conclusion, Recommendations And Implications

This transcendental phenomenological inquiry revealed that boosting morale is the lived experience of reconstructing professional confidence through affirmation, shared professional understanding, and successful teaching practice within a supportive online Community of Practice. Rather than representing a simple increase in confidence or a positive outcome of professional development, morale emerged as a relational and transformative experience through which participants came to perceive themselves as capable science teachers despite teaching outside their fields of specialization.

The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that the significance of Communities of Practice extends beyond collaborative learning and professional knowledge acquisition. Through participants' lived experiences, the study reveals that confidence is socially nurtured, professionally validated, and experientially confirmed within supportive professional relationships. Consequently, the phenomenon of boosting morale provides a richer understanding of teacher development that complements existing research on self-efficacy, professional identity, and Communities of Practice.

The findings have important implications for teacher professional development, educational leadership, and educational research. For professional development, the study suggests that initiatives designed for out-of-field science teachers should intentionally cultivate opportunities for collegial affirmation, reciprocal mentoring, collaborative reflection, and authentic classroom application rather than focusing exclusively on strengthening disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical competence. Creating psychologically safe professional communities may enable teachers to reconstruct confidence while sustaining engagement in science teaching.

For school leaders and educational policymakers, the findings highlight the importance of establishing sustainable Communities of Practice that promote professional belonging, continuous peer support, and collaborative problem-solving. Such environments may help address not only instructional challenges but also the emotional and professional needs of teachers assigned outside their fields of specialization.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of transcendental phenomenology in uncovering the essential meanings of teacher development that may remain hidden when examined solely through quantitative indicators or program evaluations. Understanding teachers' lived experiences provides complementary insights that can inform the design of more responsive and human-centered professional development initiatives.

Based on the findings, educational institutions should establish and sustain Communities of Practice that intentionally integrate mentoring, collaborative reflection, peer feedback, and opportunities for reciprocal professional support among out-of-field science teachers. Professional development programs should recognize that strengthening teacher confidence involves not only acquiring disciplinary knowledge but also participating in relationships that foster belonging, affirmation, and opportunities to experience successful teaching practice.

Future research may examine the lived experience of morale enhancement among teachers from other disciplines, educational levels, and institutional contexts to determine whether similar essential structures emerge across different professional settings. Comparative

phenomenological studies may also explore how various forms of professional learning communities shape teachers' experiences of confidence, belonging, and professional identity. Additionally, longitudinal investigations could examine how the lived experience of boosting morale evolves over time and how it influences teacher retention, instructional practice, and sustained professional growth.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the most enduring outcome of professional learning communities may not simply be improved knowledge or teaching competence but the transformation of how teachers experience themselves as professionals. When teachers encounter affirmation, shared understanding, and opportunities to enact successful practice within supportive communities, morale becomes more than an emotional response—it becomes an essential foundation for sustained professional growth and effective teaching.

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