

# Strategies for Developing Professional Competencies in Pre-service Teachers' Educational Internship and Teaching Support Program: Mediated by Teacher Self-efficacy



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**Abstract:** Using teachers' self-efficacy in Bandura's social cognitive theory as a mediator, this study work on how to promote teachers' professional competence in educational internship and teaching support programs for pre-service teachers in order to solve the problem of insufficient teachers' vocational competence in pre-service teacher training, and to provide high-quality teachers for basic education. The study begins with the concept and current status of implementation of the educational internship and teaching support program, and provides an introduction to the main ways to develop the professional competencies of pre-service teachers. Through the four major sources of self-efficacy summarized by Bandura, it analyzes the generation and development of teachers' self-efficacy in the educational internship and teaching support program. It is suggested that colleges and universities and supported schools should promote the enhancement of teachers' ethics, pedagogical competence, student management competence and self-development competence through various strategies such as improving the content of educational internship and teaching program, enhancing external policy and emotional support, strengthening the guidance of educational internship teaching and stimulating the intrinsic developmental motivation.

**Keywords:** pre-service teachers; educational internship and teaching support program; teacher self-efficacy

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the lack of educational practices in teacher education in colleges and universities has attracted great attention from Chinese society. The phenomenon of fresh teachers not being able to teach well and not daring to enter the class has caused great dissatisfaction in primary and secondary schools. In order to improve the teaching ability of Pre-service teachers and cultivate high-quality teachers in the field of basic education, the Chinese government has continued to push forward the reform of teacher education oriented to the cultivation of practical ability. In 2007, the Ministry of Education issued the Opinions on vigorously promoting the educational

internship and teaching support work of Pre-service teachers, and the Work Points of the Department of Teacher Education in 2008 pointed out again that, Pre-service teachers' educational internship and teaching support program (EITSP) should be further promoted. Since then, internships and teaching support work began to be carried out on a large scale nationwide. In 2016, the Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Strengthening Educational Practice of Pre-service teachers was issued, and the reform of teacher education went deeper and deeper, pointing directly at the problem of the "disconnect between theory and practice" of teacher education. (Tong, 2022) In 2021, Teacher Competency Standards for Pre-Service Teachers in Secondary Education, Elementary Education, and Preschool Education explicitly strengthened the educational practice of

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Pre-service teachers in several aspects, including teacher ethics, pedagogical competence, student management competence and self-development competence, so as to enhance the professional competencies of Pre-service teachers in the teaching profession.

## 2. Educational Internship and Teaching Support Program(EITSP)

### 2.1 Definition of concept

Regarding the definition of the concept of educational internship for Pre-service teachers, there are several incompletely unified statements. For example, the Dictionary explains education internship as follows: "Students, under the guidance of teachers, utilize the knowledge they have already mastered to take part in teaching and ideological and political education in secondary and primary schools and kindergartens. It is usually carried out at the graduation stage." The Encyclopedia of Education explains educational internship as "a form of practice in which senior students of secondary normal schools and higher normal colleges go to elementary or secondary schools for training in the professions of education and teaching." The Dictionary of Education explains educational internship as follows: "A form of professional training in education and teaching carried out by senior students of normal colleges of all levels and types in primary and secondary schools for internship, including visits, apprenticeships, trial lectures, acting as or assisting classroom teachers, and participation in educational administrative work."

EITSP is a special form of educational internship. Internship in support of teaching refers to practical activities in which colleges and universities select and send Pre-service teachers to basic education schools in remote and rural areas to independently assume the duties of teaching positions and complete not less than one semester of practical work in education and teaching, with a view to alleviating the lack of teachers in the base schools and enhancing Pre-service teachers' educational and teaching competencies. EITSP is an important way for pre-service teachers to develop their professional competence, but it has not previously been highly valued by colleges and pre-service teachers. Some

pre-service teachers lack the awareness of active participation in EITSP, and the implementation of EITSP in colleges and universities is not as effective as it should be.

### 2.2 Implementation of pre-service teachers' EITSP

In modern teacher education, it has been nearly 50 years since the emergence of "top practice teaching" for Pre-service teachers at Siping Normal College in 1975. Many colleges and universities are carrying out internships for Pre-service teachers across the country, and related research has received the attention of some scholars and frontline researchers. In 1997, Xinzhou Normal College launched the "411 Project" as the core of the poverty alleviation internship program, which formed the largest internship and teaching support program at that time. The internship and support program of Southwest University began in 2002, expanding year by year, and with the support of the Ministry of Education, it has constructed a "model of teacher training for rural primary and secondary schools" that integrates the problems of rural primary and secondary school teachers and the reform of the training mode of teacher education personnel. Since 2004, Jiangxi Normal University has been implementing the "Red Land Internship and Teaching Project", in which teacher trainees are required to carry out EITSP in primary and secondary schools in rural areas of Jiangxi Province. Xinzhou Normal College, Southwest University and Jiangxi Normal University have adopted the form of "top-grade internship teaching", which is the earliest batch of higher normal colleges and universities to explore the work of EITSP. 2007, the Ministry of Education issued the Opinions on vigorously promoting the educational internship and teaching support work of Pre-service teachers, after which the mode of internship teaching has been developed more rapidly. On the basis of the great success of the "3.5+0.5 top-ranking internship teaching" project implemented by Hebei Normal University, Hebei Province has fully promoted the EITSP. (Yuan, 2013) There are six undergraduate normal universities in Anhui Province. On the basis of the previous work of teacher education, from 2022 onwards, the whole province will unanimously map out the lack of

teachers in basic education in counties and rural areas, and coordinate the arrangement of counterparts in universities, so that universities, government, and schools of basic education will jointly open the UGS mode of teacher education and internship. Although EITSP has become an important initiative for normal university to cultivate pre-service teachers, the in-depth study of EITSP is not sufficient. A search of the China Knowledge Network database for research results on EITSP for pre-service teachers on the theme of "internship teaching" showed that there were 917 articles from 2004 to the present, and a total of 378 articles in the past ten years. There are very few studies analyzing the impact of EITSP on the development of pre-service teachers' professional competence, and only a few article are related to the study of teachers' self-efficacy in internship, which is a big research gap.

### 3. Teacher Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to execute behaviors that are necessary for generating specific performance. It reflects confidence in the ability to control one's own motivation, behavior, and social environment. Extensive research supports the claim that self-efficacy is an important influence on human achievement in a variety of settings, including education, health, sports, and business (Bandura, 1997). It is also believed, (Shao, 2012) that self-efficacy of teachers motivates students and promotes professional exploration, thus enabling teachers to become comfortable with the heavy workload of teaching towards the key for improving the effectiveness of curriculum instruction, promoting professional development, and enhancing teachers' professional well-being.

In the same way, teachers with a high level of self-efficacy tend to be more willing to try different teaching methods and to make changes and innovations in course teaching to improve teaching effectiveness. They can also affect students' affective attitudes, including motivation, self-confidence in learning, and initiative in learning as based and supported by other research (Dong, 2019) that focused more on understanding teacher self-efficacy in terms of specific teaching contexts as teachers'

self-internal measure of competence based on a specific teaching task and their self-judgment of achieving goal task.

Self-efficacy, as an individual's subjective self-judgment of his or her own abilities, is based on certain experiences or information. Bandura (1997) summarized experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physiological feedback as the four major sources of self-efficacy, which have also become the most influential factors of interest to researchers.

### 4. Teacher Self-Efficacy in EITSP

Based on Bandura's four major sources of self-efficacy, pre-service teachers can enhance teacher self-efficacy in four areas: experience, indirect experience, social persuasion, and physiological feedback in their teaching internship support.

Experience refers to events that the teacher does personally or that happen directly to the teacher. That is, how the teacher has done before when dealing with similar events. The successes or failures he has experienced can affect the level of teacher self-efficacy. Compared with educational internships, pre-service teachers enjoy more opportunities to practice teaching and student management in EITSP, which is conducive to increasing personal experience and enhancing teacher self-efficacy.

Vicarious experience is indirect experience gained by teachers. It is done by observing whether individuals in a similar situation to oneself have had success or failure in dealing with similar events. Therefore, indirect experience can be gained by observing and imitating the behavior of other outstanding teachers, studying cases in books and videos, and thus gaining teacher self-efficacy. The more similar the observed individual is to oneself, the more likely it is to influence teachers self-efficacy. For pre-service teachers, the accumulation of vicarious experience is very necessary. Because of their lack of experience, only through various ways to obtain similar experience with instructive meaning can help them deal with problems in education and teaching and get rapid professional development. Pre-service teachers can come into contact with many experienced teachers

during the internship teaching, and on-site observation is an effective way to accumulate various experience. However, since the feeder schools are usually located in remote areas and have limited excellent teachers, pre-service teachers need to gain self-efficacy enhancement more through excellent teaching videos, professional books, case banks and other forms. (Rebecca & Lisa, 2022)

Physiological feedback can affect their self-efficacy judgments for specific tasks. Emotional reactions to these tasks can lead to negative judgments about a person's ability to complete tasks. The youthful vigor of pre-service teachers and their enthusiasm for exploring as first-time teachers make them easily welcomed by rural schools. The love and trust of students and the concern of school colleagues and leaders will enable pre-service teachers to gain a great deal of positive emotional experience and enhance their confidence in education and teaching work in their teaching internships.

Social persuasion refers to other individuals' evaluation, persuasion, and self-persuasion. For pre-service teachers, mentoring in the process of practicum support is significant. Both the higher education institutions and the supported schools should implement dual tutorings, and appoint experienced mentors for the pre-service teachers to guide the pre-service teachers in all aspects of their work. Timely evaluation, encouragement, persuasion, and specific methodological guidance from mentors can enhance pre-service teachers' confidence. Research has shown that combining social persuasion and emotional experience in learning direct or indirect experiences can be very effective in enhancing teachers' self-efficacy.

### **5. Strategies for Promoting Teachers' Professional Development in EITSP**

According to the teacher professional competency standards for pre-service teachers formulated by the Ministry of Education, we discuss how to play the role of the intrinsic motivation of teacher self-efficacy to promote the professional development of pre-service teachers in four aspects, namely, teacher ethics, pedagogical competence, student management competence and self-development competence.

#### **5.1 Pre-service teachers' ethics development**

Pre-service teachers' educational beliefs are the prerequisite for their adherence to the teaching profession and conscious improvement of their professional competence. A survey on internship teaching shows that 24% of pre-service teachers indicated that they were unwilling to engage in the teaching profession after graduation, mainly because the teaching profession is too laborious and carries heavy responsibilities; 19% of pre-service teachers were unsure whether they could become a qualified teacher, and the level of teacher self-efficacy was low. ( Li, 2022 ) In addition, 29% of the pre-service teachers who are very willing to engage in the teaching profession believe that the positive impacts brought by the students' love and the sense of fulfillment in teaching during the internship support program have made them more determined to choose the teaching profession. 28% of the pre-service teachers who are willing to engage in the teaching profession believe that the social status, income level, and working environment of the teaching profession are in line with their own expectations. Facing the complex teaching environment, pre-service teachers are proud of the fulfillment brought by teaching and educating, but at the same time they are afraid of the responsibility they have to shoulder. Universities and supported schools should create conditions to bring sufficient external support to pre-service teachers, and enhance teachers' self-efficacy by establishing an incentive system for pre-service teachers, clarifying the treatment and rewards they enjoy and the resources they can obtain; carry out a variety of activities to enrich the positive emotional experience of pre-service teachers, and make pre-service teachers feel more comfortable by holding commendation assemblies, awarding certificates of honor, and publicizing and praising the advanced figures. With teacher self-efficacy enhanced in EITSP, Pre-service teachers experience the honor and happiness of teaching, so they firmly believe in their professional ideals.

#### **5.2 Pre-service teachers' pedagogical competence development**

To master the teaching process and gain teaching experience, pre-service teachers must go through teaching practice. Most of the educational

internships last for 1~2 months, and the internship sites are mainly urban schools with convenient transportation and high-quality schools. Because of the high quality of teaching required by schools, pre-service teachers participating in educational internships are often given only a few opportunities to teach in the classroom. In case of unsatisfactory classroom teaching or complaints from students and parents, the school will disqualify them from teaching in the classroom and they will be assigned to teaching support work instead. This is extremely detrimental to the development of pre-service teachers' self-efficacy. EITSP, on the other hand, can overcome these problems and gain more practice opportunities for pre-service teachers. Universities should coordinate with the supported schools to make a reasonable design of EITSP, so that pre-service teachers can have comprehensive practice in subject teaching, classroom management, teaching and research activities, etc., and gain rich practical experience in a full semester of 4-5 months. Experienced teachers must be arranged to follow up and guide them during the teaching practice to ensure the quality and student learning effect of all aspects of lesson preparation, class attendance, homework assignment, after-school counseling and assessment and evaluation, and the successful experience is an important source of obtaining teacher self-efficacy. With teacher self-efficacy enhanced in EITSP, Pre-service teachers have more confidence in their teaching. They tend to go on stage and give lessons more often, and their teaching ability naturally improves rapidly in many active teaching experiences.

### **5.3 Pre-service teachers' student management competence development**

Pre-service teachers lack student management experience and can gain indirect experience through a large number of simulation exercises and case studies, thus enhancing their sense of self-efficacy. Universities organize on-campus practical training for pre-service teachers through simulation training through microgrid teaching, virtual classroom management, and student activity program design through educational case studies. The vicarious experience accumulated by pre-service teachers provides a reference for handling similar educational

problems in EITSP, which greatly enhances pre-service teachers' self-efficacy. With teacher self-efficacy enhanced in EITSP, Pre-service teachers have more confidence to deal with students' problems. They can give opinions in seminars on student management cases and get more vicarious experiences from the other teachers' share. The student management competence of pre-service teachers is improved through learning and practice.

### **5.4 Pre-service teachers' self-development competence development**

Teachers' professional development requires external motivation, but most importantly the promotion of internal motivation. After having a basic understanding of students and teaching, pre-service teachers should learn to gradually get rid of imitation and form their own teaching and management style, which requires persistent in-depth reflection on teaching. According to C L Posner, an American scholar, "Experience without reflection is narrow experience - an experience that can only result in superficial knowledge, and if a teacher is satisfied with merely acquiring experience without thinking deeply about it, his development will be greatly limited." (Cited in Zhu, 2011) Teacher growth should be a process of capturing problems, summarizing experiences, and reflecting on practice." Thus, Posner put forward the teacher growth formula of "teacher growth = experience + reflection". (Zhu, 2011) Universities and supported schools should form pre-service teacher learning communities as organizations that support pre-service teachers' self-efficacy. Activities such as reading and reflection exchanges are organized to promote pre-service teachers' sharing of experiences, mutual encouragement and support. In the course of their teaching practice, pre-service teachers write weekly reflections on teaching, listening to lectures and student management, reviewing and revising their own work, sublimating their original experiences, improving their professionalism in reflection, and transforming their experiences into educational wisdom. Teacher self-efficacy, as an intrinsic motivation for teacher development, can motivate pre-service teachers to persist in self-development and improve their professional competence.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, pre-service teachers in the educational internship support program are able to gain rich teaching and management experience in their work as teachers, a great deal of vicarious experience in reading, reflection and seminar activities, positive physiological feedback from the support and care from schools, colleagues and students, and social persuasion from the encouragement and guidance of the dual supervisors from the university and the supported schools. Pre-service teachers' self-efficacy is enhanced in a variety of ways in EITSP. Teacher self-efficacy, as an intrinsic motivation for teacher development, plays an important role in promoting the development of teachers' professional competencies. It actively contributes to the improvement of teachers' ethics, pedagogical competence, student management competence and self-development competence. Universities and supported schools should take measures to enhance the self-efficacy of pre-service teachers and to promote the development of their professional competence.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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