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Analysis of The Educational Practicum Difficulties of Preschool Teacher Training Students Under the Cooperative Education

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Abstract

The study investigates the difficulties faced by preschool teacher training students during their educational practicum. A qualitative research was used, involving a non-quantitative questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, including a sample of 100 three-year preschool interns, who were asked to report on their problems and difficulties encountered during the practicum. The findings reveal a range of issues related to the imperfect cooperative education system, including inadequate depth of cooperation between the practicum sites and teacher training colleges, as well as an unreasonable pathway for implementation. We need to strengthen the depth of cooperation between the practicum sites and teacher training colleges to help the student teachers get through their educational practicum successfully.

Keywords: Collaborative Education, Preschool Teacher Training Students, Educational Practicum, Difficulties

Introduction

In 2012, the Chinese Ministry of Education (2012) issued a policy emphasizing the importance of implementing management measures for internship programs in teacher training colleges and strengthening the construction of the internship system. In 2016, it was recognized that the educational practicum for teacher training students was a weak link in teacher training. In 2017, it was proposed to improve the standardization of practicum. In 2021, the Ministry of Education and other departments jointly issued the Regulations on the Administration of Internships for Students in teacher training colleges. These actions demonstrate the government's prioritization of educational practicum. Then researchers began to pay more attention to the preschool educational practicum, identifying and addressing some of the difficulties and want to explore ways to optimize the practicum. However, few researchers have reflected on the difficulties faced by preschool teacher training students during their practicum process under the background of "collaborative education." "Collaborative

education" is a mechanism that involves collaboration between college teachers and teachers at the practicum site, and providing joint training to meet the needs of preschool interns.

This study explores the practice difficulties of preschool teacher training students, to provide practical reform ideas for later researchers, better optimize the practicum ways, and improve the practicum quality.

Methodology

This study adopted qualitative research methods to investigate the difficulties encountered by interns during their educational practicum. The study was conducted at a teacher training college in a prefecture-level city in Jiangsu Province, China. The college mainly offers junior college programs, with a few undergraduate majors. As part of their studies, students are required to complete an educational practicum. This college was chosen due to its longstanding history of over 100 years in the region. The preschool education students at this college are mainly three-year students. The majority of graduates from this college's preschool education program are currently employed as teachers in local kindergartens, which makes them suitable participants for this study.

The college is situated in the central region of Jiangsu Province, which comprises 13 cities. By 2023, the GDP of the city is ranked fourth among 13 cities, indicating that the city has good economic strength and may provide better development opportunities and conditions for preschool education. During that year, the college of Preschool Education had 498 interns participating in educational practicum. Due to the large population of the study, random sample techniques were used to simplify data collection procedures. Specifically, the study used a probabilistic random sampling procedure to prevent bias in the study. The instrument used in this study was an open-ended questionnaire, whose content and structure had been confirmed by three educational experts who considered the question open-ended, flexible, and extensive enough to collect true feedback from respondents while retaining individual subjectivity.

Result

1. Insufficient Development in the Cooperation Between Teacher Training Colleges and Preschool Practicum Sites

While some collaboration exists in areas such as internship arrangements, teaching research, curriculum development, and teacher construction, there is a lack of management and coordination organizations for college-enterprise cooperation and practice. For example, teacher training colleges rarely invite practicum sites for guidance or vice versa (Tian, 2022). Academic research has shown that implementing such a collaborative education model can lead to significant improvements in the quality of preschool educational practicum (Gubernan& Mcdossi, 2023).

Most teacher training colleges view their preschool education practicum sites as mere alumni networks. With the help of the interpersonal network of the college and a small number of teachers, they establish off-campus preschool educational practicum sites with off-campus kindergartens or other early education institutions. As preschool education continues to grow and the number of classes increases, teacher training colleges face a challenge in supplying enough practicum sites for their students. This has created a contradiction between the supply and demand for practicum sites, making it difficult for colleges to select high-quality kindergartens for collaborative education. As a result, the practicum sites of most teacher training colleges only serve as a means to meet the practical

needs of their students, rather than as a leading or demonstrative model for establishing high-quality kindergartens. The interns mentioned in the questionnaire: " I hope that we can increase the communication between kindergartens and colleges and establish a platform for mutual communication.

In addition, limited funding at teacher training colleges results in a shortage of funds for internship programs, with the majority of funds being allocated to practicum supervisors. This leaves little to no funds for the construction and maintenance of external practicum sites, ultimately leading to an inadequate depth of cooperation between practicum sites and teacher training colleges.

According to the "System Synergy Theory," a system is a whole composed of many elements with specific functions and interrelated factors. To achieve an orderly state, the system needs coordination, leading to order, which enhances the overall effect of the entire system (Sinclair.,&Nicoll,1981). Kindergartens and teacher training colleges should follow the theory of synergy, observe the background of "collaborative education," and improve the effectiveness of practice guidance. For example, college and kindergarten practicum supervisors can leverage the "Internet +" trend and comprehensively guide the whole internship process through online channels, enabling full-staff practice guidance and diversified guidance forms. Practicum supervisors can also use information teaching platforms to understand each intern's learning dynamics and behavior and adjust the teaching practice situation's design and content to meet the student's learning level.

With the support of the local government, kindergartens and teacher training colleges should actively participate in student practice guidance and collaborative management through the system, culture, organization, mechanism, and resource guarantee, reducing the "realistic impact" of interns and improving their practice quality. Through the establishment of the organization, capital investment, personnel investment, enrollment cooperation, training program formulation, collaborative management, teaching operation, quality training, employment security, benefit sharing, and other aspects of collaborative management, under the same educational practicum goal, innovative, application-oriented preschool practice talents can be jointly cultivated.

2. Challenges in Internship Path Arrangement for Collaborative Education: Limited Opportunities to Experience the Role of Teachers

Collaborative education is a vital component of teacher training programs that aims to provide students with practical experience in the classroom. However, the current implementation path arrangement of collaborative education is deemed to be unreasonable, as it restricts the interns' exposure to different age groups of children, hindering their ability to gain a comprehensive understanding of the physical and mental characteristics and childcare methods of children of different ages.

Instead, most interns are confined to practicing in a limited learning situation, where their understanding and practice ability is limited to a single classroom setting. This approach restricts their ability to experience the diversity and complexity of activity objects and situations, thus failing to provide them with a complete understanding of the role of preschool teachers. The tasks, learning content, and experience offered during the internship are also limited, further impacting their experience and overall learning outcomes.

Research conducted by foreign scholars highlights that interns working under such limited circumstances are likely to deliver unsatisfactory practice results. This is mainly because they may imitate their teacher's practices, follow a predetermined teaching

approach, or overlook children's ideas, leading to anxiety and conflicts. Such circumstances also result in interns assuming an authoritative and regulatory role, limiting their ability to consider children's ideas and opinions.

To address this issue, optimizing the practice path is crucial in ensuring that teacher training students receive a comprehensive and practical understanding of their role. This can help ease the interns' tension and pressure during the internship, leading to an improved overall internship experience. Furthermore, it may enhance their initiative and enthusiasm, stimulate their potential, and improve their sense of accomplishment, ultimately delivering better education practice outcomes.

3. The Insufficient Presence of "Double Teacher" Teachers in the Collaborative Education Team

Teacher education plays a vital role in cultivating practical talents for society. However, teacher education faces various challenges in the process of professional development, especially in terms of the practicum guidance work. The heavy teaching task and limited off-job or half-work opportunities make it difficult for teachers to participate in practicum exercises, which further hinders the development of their professional practical ability.

In addition, the evaluation system and incentive mechanism for preschool teacher training teachers need to be improved. Currently, the proportion of preference and incentive to "double-qualified" teachers is not large, and scientific research results are prioritized over professional practice ability in terms of reward and distribution, training, and job promotion. Moreover, the lack of post-support and training planning for practicum supervisors and limited performance subsidies and professional title evaluation support for college supervisors have resulted in the neglect of the internal motivation of teachers. As a result, many practicum supervisors are task-driven and lack enthusiasm and motivation in guiding the practicum work, which directly affects the guidance work of college guidance teachers.

College teachers may be required to act as practicum supervisors during the preschool practicum due to college administrative practices. However, a lack of experience in the preschool practice field may make teachers less confident in facing internship problems raised by students, resulting in the tendency to seek help from front-line kindergarten teachers. To address these challenges, it is necessary to provide more support for college teachers in terms of practicum guidance and professional development, such as improving the evaluation system and incentive mechanism, and providing comprehensive training and support for practicum supervisors.

The teachers in the practicum site have sufficient teaching experience, but it does not mean that each instructor has enough professional education theories, methods, and skills to support and guide the teacher training students (Cheung et al., 2023). The limited learning time and experience of teacher training students can lead to negative perceptions by some preschool practicum supervisors who view them as lacking in theoretical knowledge and practical skills. This often results in critical guidance towards the activity teaching plans of the teacher training students, instead of constructive feedback. Fuller's teachers have analyzed this issue in light of stage theory and have identified that supervisors tend to provide mainly unilateral feedback and one-way guidance, which fails to establish an equal dialogue between the supervisors and the teacher training students. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the guidance model to ensure a more positive and effective practicum experience for the teacher training students. This could include providing more opportunities for dialogue and mutual learning between the preschool and college supervisors, as well as increasing the focus on positive feedback and encouragement to enhance the confidence and competence of teacher

training students (Yang, 2021). There is also a lack of familiarity between some internship supervisors and interns, and students are not very comfortable communicating with their teachers when they encounter some problems and stress. In addition, the kindergarten practicum supervisors regard the interns as "passers-by" and manage the interns more easily. In the final practicum evaluation, the students' practice performance is highly in line with the "principle of human feelings". Many interns mentioned, "need more profound guidance"; "I hope the instructor can provide more guidance and suggestions during the lessons"; "I hope to receive guidance from a teacher with professional theoretical knowledge.

To comprehensively enhance the management of practice guidance teachers and strengthen students' practical education abilities, the Ministry of Education put forward opinions on strengthening students' education practice in 2016. Teacher education colleges and universities were required to carry out standardized education practices and establish specific requirements for education practice teachers. Only instructors with a strong sense of responsibility, teaching experience, and familiarity with primary and secondary school education teaching practices can provide effective guidance. The quality of the practice instructor directly affects the quality of the educational practice, which is crucial to developing practical abilities and wisdom in normal university students.

In conjunction with the certification standards for normal majors, preschool education majors should establish a rigorous selection system and measures for supervisors. Some teacher training colleges have explicitly stipulated the professional title requirements for practicum supervisors, while all teacher training colleges should strengthen supervisors' skills training. A survey of kindergarten practicum supervisors showed that the ability to integrate theory with practice is the weakest among all abilities. Currently, there are few evaluation and incentive mechanisms for supervisors, and only a small number of teacher training colleges have formulated evaluation conditions for practicum supervisors. However, these are limited to self-application by practicum supervisors and lack detailed evaluation rules. Researchers suggest that the monitoring of supervisors should be strengthened to promote effective practice work (Hui, 2020).

During interviews with some kindergarten practicum supervisors, it was mentioned that serving as an education practicum supervisor provided more opportunities for reflection on their educational behavior to provide satisfactory responses to the interns' questions. Additionally, some preschool practicum supervisors indicated that they had learned a great deal from their interns. Therefore, the collaborative education team should deeply appreciate the importance of future teacher training, which plays a vital role in the process of developing the educational sentiments of future teachers, and the work of educational practice guidance, which is the work of educating people and educating themselves.

4. The lack of guidance of "professional spirit" in collaborative education leads to problems in professional identity formation.

In a survey conducted by Yun (2019), it was found that almost half of the interns believed that the profession of preschool teaching is complex and involves too much hard work, and 17.72% of the interns felt that the kindergarten internship was too challenging p.31. This indicates that students lack the spirit of perseverance, which is contrary to the concentration, patience, confidence, and practical spirit of study required in the "professional spirit."

There are also contradictions between the practicum site's job requirements and the psychological adaptation of some students. With only two and a half years of study, teacher

training students must apply what they have learned and engage in kindergarten, assuming the role of a "preschool teacher." However, some students may struggle to quickly adapt to the kindergarten's working rhythm and find it difficult to enter the role of a "preschool teacher." This can lead to a "realistic impact" and cause some passive coping phenomena.

During the internship, teacher training students face multiple tasks, such as employment, teacher qualification examinations, degree promotion, and pressure. Combined with the fact that internships often have little or no salary, it can create a psychological gap, causing students to prioritize their learning activities and have a low level of commitment to practice. In the survey, more than 70% of the interns believed that the educational practicum provided them with many benefits, such as a "better understanding of children's physical and mental development characteristics, age characteristics and personality differences," "appreciating the value of kindergarten games for children," "understanding the importance of one-day activities in kindergarten," "improving practical ability and forming practical wisdom," and enhancing various abilities such as communication, problem-solving, organization, and child observation skills. Additionally, 76% of kindergarten practicum supervisors believed that interns made significant improvements in their abilities through the internship. However, only 25 percent of teacher training students thought they could stick to their original aspirations and pursue a career in preschool education.

To address the difficulties of preschool teacher training students under cooperative education, it is crucial to improve the selection and management of practicum sites and design internship programs that align with students' abilities and interests. Providing students with appropriate guidance and support is equally important. Encouraging a spirit of perseverance among students and emphasizing the importance of the "professional spirit" can help enhance their psychological adaptation, practical ability, and wisdom. Ultimately, the goal of teacher education should be to cultivate high-quality preschool teachers who are committed to their profession and have a deep understanding of children's development and education. It is also essential for college teachers to actively support and guide interns, as their lack of engagement may reduce interns' practice enthusiasm and hinder their ability to reflect creatively and develop their problem-solving skills. This research study provides meaningful theoretical and contextual contributions to the field of preschool education. By identifying and addressing the difficulties faced by preschool teacher training students in the context of cooperative education and the challenges related to internship arrangement, the study provides valuable insights for enhancing the quality of practicum. The findings offer important implications for the development of effective strategies and policies that can benefit future teachers. Furthermore, the focus on a specific teacher training college in Jiangsu Province, China, adds a contextual understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities within that region. This research not only advances the field of preschool education practicum but also has practical implications for educational practitioners, institutions, and policy makers in Jiangsu Province and other similar contexts. The comprehensive analysis of these issues contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics involved in preschool educational practicum and paves the way for further research and improvement in this important area of teacher training.

Discussion

Interns experience major role expectation changes during the relatively short internship period, which can cause confusion and pressure. Regular evaluation of interns by practicum supervisors, college internship managers, and college administrators can also lead to feelings

of fear and anxiety, negatively affecting interns' professional identity, work efficiency, and overall well-being. Therefore, improving the collaborative education system is crucial. Establishing a system fostering a long-term, depth, and harmonious education mechanism is necessary to create an open, effective, rich, and vertical practice system. Ensuring the long-term operation of standardized collaborative education is crucial.

Creating a three-way collaboration between interns, college teachers, and kindergarten teachers is not an easy task. It requires off-campus practice teachers to have a deep passion for teaching and to share a common educational practicum goal and vision with college teachers. This collaboration should not become a mere "collective behavior," but rather a partnership built on mutual understanding, cooperation, and a shared commitment to enhancing the quality of educational practicum. Therefore, it is essential to establish a collaborative education system that is grounded in long-term, effective, and harmonious mechanisms to address the difficulties faced by interns during their practicum.

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