

# Research on Action Obstacles in Practice Guidance of Teachers in Early Childhood Education in Higher Vocational Colleges of China

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**Abstract:** Teachers' practice guidance is very important in the process of training professionals in early childhood education for children at the age of 0-3 in higher vocational colleges. To promote teachers to better conduct practice guidance, it is necessary to study and remove teachers' action obstacles existing in practice guidance. According to the interviews with 21 teachers in the X College of China, it was found that the teachers were faced with multiple internal and external action obstacles, including weak practice awareness, difficult knowledge structure adjustment, lack of practice quality, insufficient time and energy insufficient attention, lack of support systems, single evaluation mechanisms, unclear industry standards, low admission barriers, and excessive business behavior.

**Keywords:** Higher vocational colleges, Practice guidance, Early childhood education

## 1. Research Background

Early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 is an important constituent part of the education system and life-long education. Since the 1980s, the international concept to early childhood education has extended from early childhood education for children at the age of 3-6 to educate for children at the age of 0-6, and the quality of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-6 is improved on the basis of universalizing early childhood education for the children at the age of 3-6<sup>[1]</sup>.

International study shown that the age of 0-3 was one of the key periods for individual development, and the experiences at the age of 0-3 were closely related to future development potential and life-long learning ability<sup>[2]</sup>. The implementation of high-quality education and care services for children has proved to be conducive to the social cognitive and physical development of the children at the age of 0-3, to reduce the probability of leaving school after compulsory education<sup>[3]</sup>, to effectively release the labor force, increase the employment opportunities of both parents, especially mothers<sup>[4]</sup>, alleviate the income pressure of families, and achieve social equity and gender equality, which internationally attaches great importance to the education and care services for the children at the age of 0-3.

For a long time, China's theory and practice of early childhood education focus more on the kindergarten stages of the children at the age of 3-6, and pay less attention to early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3. With the changes of traditional family structures under the influence of urban modernization and the population fertility policy, especially the full liberalization of the fertility policy, the "familyism" child-rearing model in the past is difficult to sustain, and the problem of "insufficient quantity and structural imbalance" of the social education and care services is prominent. Therefore, the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* clearly stated "focusing on early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3" in the development missions for early childhood education. Early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 is included in the China's national plane for education reform and development.

Through literature review, it is found that the researches on the training and construction of teachers in early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 in China mainly focus on the comparative studies on the qualification standards of foreign early childhood education practitioners and the pre-service training systems, the present situations and problems of the pre-service training of the teachers in early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 in China, and the post-service professional

development difficulties. Europe, America and related organizations have gained some experience in career admission, professional standards, and professional capability development of professionals in early childhood education<sup>[5][6]</sup>. In sum, the related research in China are limited by the late practice and exploration of the training and construction of the teachers in the early childhood education, the limited training, and the lack of systematic analysis on the problems in the training system and the post-service profession development<sup>[7]</sup>.

In fact, the use of the concept of early childhood education in different contexts is not completely unified, and the ages of children in early childhood education in different countries are also different. The early childhood education practitioners are internationally named differently. Some OECD countries, such as Sweden, that implement "integrated education and care" for the children at the age of 0-6 have unified requirements for the qualifications and education levels of the teachers and caretakers for the children at the overall early childhood education and care stages, and use the same professional name "early childhood education and care staff" (Early Childhoods Education and Care staff, ECEC staff for short), which highlights the core quality of both education and care<sup>[8]</sup>. Some countries also have a clear name distinction between personnel in early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 and the teachers for the children at the age of 3-6, call them "Early Childhood Edu-carer" and "pedagogue", etc. respectively, and have corresponding qualifications, career standards and training requirements for the teachers in early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3<sup>[9]</sup>. Early childhood education mentioned in this paper refers to early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3.

In 2010, specialized-level majors of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 were initially established in China. Higher vocational colleges have constructed training schemes for the majors of early childhood education with respective characteristics, which reflect the training characteristic of "practice orientation" and put forward multi-dimensional and in-depth development requirements for the practice behavior of the majors of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3. In 2017, the establishment of the majors of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 in higher vocational colleges in China began to rise. According to incomplete statistics, there were 58 major sites for early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3. And 4012 students were enrolled<sup>[7]</sup>. In specific implementation processes, teachers' effective practice guidance behavior will directly affect the effect of students' teaching practice and determine the quality of the majors of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3.

In actual operation processes, the practice guidance behavior of teachers in the majors of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 in the higher vocational colleges is not optimistic and has many problems. The *Opinion on Strengthening Teaching Practice of Normal School Students (Teachers [2016] No.2)* issued by the Ministry of Education clearly stated that the teaching practice of the normal school students still has problems such as unclear objectives, insufficient content, relatively simple forms, weak guidance, and weak management evaluation and organization assurance. The issues in this paper are whether there are action obstacles in the practice guidance of the teachers in higher vocational colleges under the major requirement of "practice orientation" in early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3, what the specific action obstacles are if there are the action obstacles, and how these obstacles restrict the professional practice guidance behavior of the teachers in the higher vocational colleges.

## 2. Research objects and methods

In this study, the 21 teachers who teach courses related to early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 in the X College were selected as the research objects by using the case research method of qualitative research and according to the principle of "quota sampling". In 2010, the X College applied for the major of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3, and is one of the first schools in China to have the major of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3.

The 21 typical teachers were selected for research during case selection according to the factors such as ages, genders, job titles, posts, and departments. The characteristics of the cases are shown in Table 1. In terms of information collection of the cases, the interviewees are coded as follows: A for male, B for female, T for a teaching position, FT for a managerial position (including "being in both the teaching position and the managerial position"), and numbers for serial numbers of the interviewees. For example, A-T-01 indicates that the first interviewee is a male teacher in the teaching position.

Table 1: Characteristics of cases (total quantity of cases: 21)

Characteristic of case	Type	Quantity of cases
Age	25-40	18
	41 and above	3
Gender	Male	2
	Female	19
Job title	Lecturer and lower	18
	Associate professor and higher	3
Post type	Teaching position	19
	Managerial position (including "being in both the teaching position and the managerial position")	2
Discipline category	Humanities and social science	19
	Science and engineering	2
Experience in early childhood education	Yes	1
	No	20

This paper adopts semi-structured in-depth interviews. Based on the interviewees' willingness, the interviewees were interviewed face to face and one to one based on the interview outline. The interviews focused on "What do you think are the action obstacles in the practice guidance of the students majoring early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3? and Why?" Questions and dialogs were asked and made based on related topics that are automatically appearing in the field, multiple return visits were made to the cases that have experienced and thought deeply, and recording was performed with the consent of the interviewees. Finally, analysis, comparison, and induction were performed according to the codes, to form research findings<sup>[10]</sup>.

### 3. Research findings

The content analysis method is used to process data. The recordings of the 21 interviewees are coded, and free nodes and tree nodes are set. Through coding, one core code, namely, the action obstacle, three associated codes, namely, the personal level, the school level, and the social level, and 10 open codes, including weak practice awareness, difficult knowledge structure adjustment, lack of practice quality, insufficient time and energy, insufficient attention, lack of support systems, single evaluation mechanisms, unclear industry standards, low admission barriers, and excessive business behavior. In the analysis process, the interview data, literature, and the experience of the researcher are continuously interacted.

The 21 interviewed teachers all believed that there were great action obstacles in the practice guidance of the students majoring in early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3, which are more obvious than those in other majors of the college. For the practice guidance of the students in this major, all the interviewed teachers confirmed the necessity of the practice guidance, but for the question "How much did you guide the practice of students in this major in actual operation process?", the answers of the interviewed teachers were mostly "dare not to guide" and "no way to start". The reasons for the contradiction between this concept and behavior are mainly reflected in the following three aspects.

#### 3.1 Personal level: internal resistance to action obstacles in practice guidance

Teachers are the executors and implementers of practice guidance. However, there are various obstacles in the action processes. The interviewees have the following feelings:

I work in this school after my postgraduate courses, that is, is from one school to another school, receive academic-oriented training, and feel that my knowledge structure and even thinking mode are academic. To tell the truth, I really dare not to guide the practice of the students. (B-T-02)

I am confused about this major and not a major, have not had children, and I am timid during classes, and dare not to guide practice. (B-T-13)

I majored in early childhood education, and I also had some knowledge about early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3. However, the knowledge is limited, and I did not study it in a systematic manner. In the past, I only went to kindergartens for internships, and never went to early childhood education institutions. Now I teach these classes while looking for information and understanding it. I really have no ability to provide direct guidance to students. (B-T-17)

In terms of understanding, I believe that everyone should be aware of the importance of the practice guidance for the students. However, it is very difficult for this major. The reasons are complex. However, there are individual reasons. For example, most teachers who teach this major do not have experience in

this major and lack practice. How can they talk about practice guidance? (A-FT-01)

I think, to guide students, teachers must have corresponding practice ability or practice experience. I basically have no opportunity to know the early childhood education industry, and have no such ability and experience. In addition, now I work in two campuses. The teaching workload is heavy, and the pressure of applying for the job title is also heavy. I also have research tasks. Time and energy are far from enough. It is difficult to improve my practice capabilities even if I want. (A-T-01)

I feel like a gyroscope every day. I have to teach classes, apply for topics, write articles, and do a lot of things. In addition, I have to frequently attend meetings and fill in numerous and messy forms. As a young teacher, I am arranged by leaders to do a lot of trivial work. I have no time and energy to do that (namely, professional practice guidance). (B-T-18)

### ***3.2 School level: main cause of action obstacles in practice guidance***

It was pointed out in the Urie·Bronfenbrenner's developmental ecology that the individual and the environmental system in which the individual was located were interdependent. As one of the places where teachers' practice guidance occurs, the school has many dynamic links with teachers' practice guidance. Good school environment and system design will greatly promote the emergence and development of teachers' practice guidance. Vice versa, great obstacles are brought to it. It is found in the interviews that the school level is the biggest obstacle to teachers' practice guidance. The problems at the school level are involved in all the interview materials of the 21 interviewees. The following cases depicts existence of this obstacle in depth.

To be honest, I am not willing to teach the courses of early childhood education. The quantity of students is not large, and the quantity of students does not meet the school's requirements (Note: it is stipulated in the school that, if the quantity of students does not reach 50, the salary will be multiplied by a certain coefficient). The practice guidance is very energy-consuming, but there is no return, especially in the economy. (B-T-03)

Although this major has been in progress for a long time, many aspects are still in the exploration stage. The school does not attach enough importance to it. There is no system or team. For example, for professional courses, many tasks are assigned to the teaching and research team, and teachers teach the courses in turn year by year. As a result, many teachers dare not to invest too much energy in the courses due to instability. They are also passive in guiding students. (B-T-05)

We have few learning and training opportunities. There are many reasons. I think much training in early childhood education is commercial and is expensive. Considering the cost performance, the school generally does not support the training. In addition, whether the school attaches importance to it is also a key factor. The school encourages us to learn online. However, for the major with strong practice, it is not enough for us to learn online. (B-T-14)

I think the school's incentive systems and appraisal systems will still have an impact. For the new major such as the early childhood education major, the school should have a matching system, instead of completely inheriting the original one. However, our school does not have such a matching system. For example, job title evaluation more focuses on scientific research and excellent courses. It is difficult to add points to your job title because it is difficult to quantify the content such as practice guidance. Under this system, it is difficult to ask the teachers to improve their practice abilities and practice guidance abilities. (B-T-15)

There's no site! This is my deepest feeling. How can I provide guidance without a practice site? Although our practice teaching is well written in the scheme, it is not really like that during implementation. The practice guidance in the school is more based on the simulation teaching in the classroom, but there is no true trainees. It makes no sense regardless of the guidance. It is even more difficult to guide the practice outside the school. Due to the lack of cooperation mechanism with relevant early childhood education institutions, many students can only be temporarily arranged to parent-children gardens or directly to kindergartens. Sometimes, they may even conduct internships in the same way as students in preschool education. (B-T-18)

### ***3.3 Social level: deep cause of action obstacles in practice guidance***

The causes on the personal level and the school level are directly or indirectly affected by social factors. The attribute, position, and development of early child education for the children at the age of 0-

3 in society are deep causes that hinder teachers' practice guidance. Many teachers have mentioned the following feelings:

The development prospect of this industry is certainly good. However, what should we do to in implementation? How should we do? What's the way? Currently, many aspects of the industry are still in the exploration stage. China has provided some good policy directions, but the specific operation level is not clear. Under many uncertainties, teachers do not have too much stamina and motivation. (B-FT-1)

I think it is very important to set standards for all aspects of the industry. However, this is very lacking at present. For example, industry standards, admission standards of teachers in early childhood education, and a series of standards for pre-service training are insufficient. There is no unified reference. Without the standards, how do I know whether I'm right? I don't even know right or wrong. It does not made sense to talk about quality. (B-T-01)

Currently, this major is still in a mess in society. Some institutions do it in a more standard way. However, many early education childhood institutions dare not to cooperate with schools or accept our students' internships. Why? They dare not! Because it is in disorder, and many things are still non-compliant. There is no internship site. It does not make sense to talk about practice. (B-T-06)

You can learn that many teachers in early childhood education institutions have different backgrounds. The admission barriers are too low. They do not pursue a discipline background. Instead, they work directly after pre-service training. Some leaders of early childhood education gardens even said: "We have our own training systems. We are confident that, no matter who comes, we can train them." But are these "training systems" scientific? I have taken my child to receive some early childhood education. The courses of many institutions are medley. So can such pre-service training really train qualified and excellent teachers? It's hard to say! On the other hand, the guidance that we painstakingly give to our students in the schools may be "worthless" in the eyes of persons in these institutions, and even many students may be affected. They think that learning in schools is not important. This will certainly affect our teachers in the long run. (B-T-12)

The business climate of the early childhood education industry is too heavy. Many organizations are secretive, concerning about material disclosure. They do things in a hidden way. However, they like to make a stunt and promote attractively. As a result, the training of this major is very expensive. It is difficult for teachers to improve their practice capabilities through training. (B-T-19)

#### 4. Research results and discussions

Based on the above research findings, the content analysis method is used to process the data based on the interview materials. The following 10 specific problems are involved in the action obstacles in the practice guidance of the teachers in the major of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 from the personal level, the school level, and the social level. Table 2 lists the summary results.

*Table 2: Specific action obstacles in practice guidance of teachers in major of early childhood education for children at the age of 0-3 in higher vocational colleges*

Level	Specific action obstacle	Quantity of interviewees	Percentage (%)
Personal level	Weak practice awareness	12	57.14
	Difficult knowledge structure adjustment	18	85.71
	Lack of practice quality	17	80.95
	Insufficient time and energy	19	90.48
School level	Insufficient attention	20	95.24
	Lack of support systems	17	80.95
	Single evaluation mechanisms	14	66.67
Social level	Unclear industry standards	13	61.90
	Low admission barriers	9	42.86
	Excessive business behavior	6	28.57

The major of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 is a major with strong practice, with the aim of training applicative professionals. In the development process, the practice guidance of teachers as the cores of education faces many obstacles, which will seriously affect the training of the professionals and the development of the whole industry. To effectively improve the quality of the training of the proessionals in early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3, it is necessary to remove the related obstacles in the practice guidance of the teachers.

#### ***4.1 Teachers' attitudes, habits, knowledge structures, practice quality, etc. hinder teachers' practice actions.***

The development history of the major of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 in China is short. At present, the early childhood education major is mainly set up in higher vocational colleges, and teachers in many higher vocational colleges are still studying and exploring. In recent years, many higher vocational colleges have accumulated a large quantity of academic teachers with master's and doctor's degrees. These teachers are basically graduated from research universities and receive academic-oriented training. Their knowledge systems and thinking modes are also academic. Academic and theoretical development has become the habits of these teachers. The habits directly affect the formation of their practice quality, including their practice concepts, practice awareness, and practice abilities. In addition, the early childhood education major is a new major. Many teachers lack the knowledge structure of the major of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3. The teaching and scientific research achievements of teachers are not rich. The proportion of "teachers with professional knowledge and rich practice experience" is not high.

Due to the habit and background, the teachers' awareness of practice guidance is insufficient. In addition to extremal environment stimulation, changing habits requires individual active investment. However, teachers in many higher vocational colleges have heavy teaching and scientific research tasks and have no time to go to the front line for practice. During interviews, many teachers mock themselves as "meeting teachers and "form-filling teachers". Teachers' time and energy are divided into fragments, which cannot generate the driving force for changing habits from inside to outside. As a result, teachers are difficult to practice, and the individual professional practice quality is insufficient. In addition, the insufficient individual practice quality further deepens the habits, and becomes the obstacle source of teachers' practice guidance actions.

#### ***4.2 The school is the biggest obstacle to teachers' practice actions.***

This paper finds that school is the biggest obstacle to teachers' practice actions. In all the interview materials of the 21 interviewees, the quantity of the interviewees and the quantity of topic words involved in their conversations most likely point to the limitations imposed by the school on teachers' practice actions.

Most teachers in the major in early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 lack professional backgrounds and practice capabilities. They need to adjust their knowledge structures and invest a lot of time and energy to improve their practice guidance capabilities. In this case, teachers hope that their contributions can be rewarded and recognized. Therefore, they need to obtain diversified support from the school level, including more training and learning opportunities, better software and hardware conditions, more reasonable evaluation systems, and more comprehensive support systems. On the one hand, compared with many traditional majors, the major of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 is in the early stage of major construction and lacks of reference and experience in many aspects. As a result, many schools can only explore the way carefully, which cannot effectively meet teachers' expectations. On the other hand, the school does not attach enough importance to the construction of this major. As a result, the system design of the whole major from goals to achievements is not strong. The construction of the corresponding professional training goals, curriculum systems, teaching material selection, teacher strength, and training bases is far behind the development needs of the major. The systems, measures, and actions are not implemented and improved. The root cause of these problems and shortcomings is related to the unclear orientation of the major of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 and personnel training in higher vocational colleges, which leads to the wait-and-see attitude and negative practice guidance behavior of most teachers.

Therefore, schools must first clarify the orientation of the major of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3, sort out the goals of training of professionals in early childhood education, and clarify the practice guidance behavior of the teachers in the early childhood education major. Then, they can be provided with support in system construction, fund guarantee, and evaluation system, to maximize the synchronization between teachers and organizations and improve teachers' practice behavior.

#### ***4.3 Society is the root of restricting teachers' practice actions.***

This paper finds that obstacles on the social level are least mentioned, but this does not mean that social factors have little impact on teachers' actions. In fact, the social factors are probably the deep

reasons that restrict current orientation of the major of early children education for the children at the age of 0-3 and teachers' practice guidance actions in the current higher vocational colleges.

The present situation and prospect of industry development in the social factors will directly influence the establishment of professional training scheme and related guarantee mechanism and will also directly lead to the investment of teachers in major training. At present, first, the early childhood education industry is still in the "fast growth" stage. Although China has issued relevant policies to regulate the industry, policy guidance cannot directly change the inherent disadvantages of the early childhood education industry in a short period of time. Second, under the drive of economic benefits, many behaviors in early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 are strongly commercial and confidential. As a result, the entire industry cannot develop continuously, healthily and stably. Third, the admission barriers of the industry of early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 are too low, which leads to unclear ideas in professional training and unclear students' employment selection. These "uncertainties" actually cause great uneasy feelings for schools and teachers' practice guidance. Therefore, as Lijuan Pang, a professor in the Beijing Normal University, pointed out in the "Forum on Early Infant Development, Education and Care Services for Family Parenting Support", it is necessary to focus on and study seven key policy issues: management systems, teacher team building, and supervision, evaluation, and reward systems. China must release relevant top-level design as soon as possible, and have clear orientation on key issues, to standardize the development of the entire industry. Relevant higher vocational colleges gradually clarify the direction of professional training through systems.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, teachers' practice guidance actions are the key to the training of the professionals majoring in early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 in the higher vocational colleges and are related to the success of the training of the professionals majoring in early childhood education for the children at the age of 0-3 and the development of the whole industry. This requires further improvement of China's policy. Higher vocational colleges should formulate appropriate systems and measures to support teachers' practice guidance actions according to their own situations. Teachers should overcome their own obstacles to meet the needs of the training of the professionals majoring in early childhood education in higher vocational colleges.

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