

Safety Nets and Turning Points: Managing Collaboration and Innovation for Teacher Efficacy in Teaching Assistant Program

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Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi dinamika manajerial Program Asistensi Mengajar (TAP) dalam menjembatani kesenjangan teori-praktik bagi calon guru. Studi ini menyelidiki bagaimana kolaborasi dan inovasi dikelola untuk membentuk efikasi diri profesional dalam konteks pendidikan tinggi Islam. Menggunakan desain fenomenologi transendental, penelitian ini menganalisis pengalaman hidup, delapan calon guru yang dipilih melalui purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam kepada 8 informan dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik sistematis. Penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa efikasi guru bukanlah hasil statis, melainkan konstruksi dinamis yang ditempa melalui interaksi antara jaringan pengaman dan titik balik. Kolaborasi dengan guru pamong berfungsi sebagai jaringan pengaman psikologis yang memberikan persuasi sosial esensial, memungkinkan mahasiswa untuk mengambil risiko inovatif. Selanjutnya, inovasi pedagogis berfungsi sebagai titik balik yang menghasilkan pengalaman penguasaan yang otentik. Namun, studi ini mengidentifikasi hambatan manajerial kritis: disparitas infrastruktur di antara sekolah mitra sering kali menghambat proses ini, menciptakan kesenjangan efikasi. Efikasi yang berkelanjutan dicapai lebih lanjut melalui pembiasaan ulang kognitif atas kegagalan, dari beban pribadi menjadi tantangan profesional. Temuan ini menyarankan bahwa Lembaga Pendidikan Tenaga Kependidikan (LPTK) harus mengelola TAP tidak hanya sebagai penempatan administratif semata, tetapi sebagai intervensi psikologis yang komprehensif. Manajemen harus menstandarisasi protokol dukungan mentor dan mengatasi kesenjangan fasilitas untuk memastikan pengembangan profesional yang setara bagi seluruh kandidat.

Kata kunci: Efikasi Guru; Program Asistensi Mengajar; Manajemen Pendidikan; Fenomenologi; *safety nets*

Abstract: This study explores the managerial dynamics of the Teaching Assistant Program (TAP) in bridging the theory-practice gap for pre-service teachers. It investigates how collaboration and innovation are managed to form professional self-efficacy within an Islamic higher education context. Employing a transcendental phenomenological design, this study analyzed the lived experiences of eight pre-service teachers selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered via in-depth interviews to 8 informants and analyzed using systematic thematic analysis.

The study reveals that teacher efficacy is not a static outcome but a dynamic construction forged through the interplay of "safety nets" and "turning points." Collaboration with mentors functions as a psychological safety net that provides essential social persuasion, enabling students to take risks. Subsequently, pedagogical innovation serves as the turning point that generates authentic mastery experiences. However, the study identifies a critical managerial barrier: infrastructure disparities among partner schools often hinder this process, creating an "efficacy divide." Sustainable efficacy is further achieved through the cognitive reframing of failure from a personal burden to a professional challenge. The findings suggest that Teacher Education Institutions (LPTKs) must manage TAP not merely as an administrative placement but as a comprehensive psychological intervention. Management must standardize mentor support protocols and address facility gaps to ensure equitable professional development for all candidates.

Keywords: *Teacher Efficacy; Teaching Assistant Program; Educational Management; Phenomenology; Safety Nets.*

Introduction

Contemporary teacher education management faces a formidable challenge in bridging the persistent gap between pedagogical theory and the complex realities of classroom practice (Mudiono, 2025). This theory-practice gap is frequently cited as a primary driver of low self-efficacy among pre-service teachers when they first encounter the professional school environment (Hakim, 2024). Without a systematically managed field experience, student teachers often succumb to pedagogical anxiety, which can severely hinder their long-term professional development and willingness to innovate. The conventional educational management model, which focuses solely on the transfer of theoretical knowledge, has proven inadequate for preparing prospective teachers to face the dynamic realities of the classroom (Chen, 2025). In response to these dynamics, Religious Higher Education Institutions (LPTK) have implemented the Teaching Assistant Program (TAP) as a strategic experiential learning management intervention aimed at transforming academic knowledge into reflective practice.

TAP is designed not merely as a formal academic requirement but as a managed ecosystem built upon the dual pillars of collaboration and innovation (Kamaliyah & Kawakip, 2025). Through structured collaborative management involving student teachers, school mentors, and university supervisors by Crutzen (2025), the program aims to facilitate a smoother professional transition by forcing students out of their theoretical comfort zones (Clinciu, 2023). In this context, Octaviani (Octaviani, 2023) clarify about educational management plays a pivotal role in providing the necessary support structures to ensure that students can effectively implement pedagogical innovations despite the varying constraints of partner schools (Bonomi et al., 2021). Ultimately, the success of Religious Higher Education Institution management will be measured by its ability to produce graduates who are not only academically competent but also have the confidence to act and adapt (Rachel et al., 2023).

Theoretically, teacher efficacy is not a static trait but a dynamic psychological construct shaped by environmental and managerial factors. Bandura (1977) identified mastery experiences and social persuasion as the most potent sources of self-efficacy. Within the TAP framework form Priatmoko (2024), mastery experiences occur when students successfully execute innovative teaching strategies, while social persuasion is

manifested through the collective "safety nets" provided by peer and mentor support (Restiningtyas et al., 2022). However, many teaching assistant programs remain overly focused on administrative compliance, often neglecting the management of the psychological dimensions that are crucial for sustainable teacher efficacy.

The phenomenon of infrastructure disparity among partner schools often acts as a managerial barrier that has not been adequately addressed in student placement policies, leading to an efficacy divide among candidates (Mangubat et al., 2025). When a school lacks basic technological facilities, the student's ability to demonstrate innovation and thus gain a mastery experience is severely compromised. This highlights a critical need for LPTKs to standardize the quality of support across all participating schools to ensure equity in professional development (Sgaramella & Ferrari, 2024).

Pre-service teachers often enter the field with idealistic views, only to face the reality of low student engagement and classroom management issues (Rachel et al., 2023; Webster et al., 2015). Managed mentorship within the TAP provides a platform for students to receive constructive feedback, allowing them to shift their attribution of failure from personal incompetence to professional challenges that can be overcome (Webster et al., 2015). This resilience-building is a cornerstone of professional efficacy that requires intentional management beyond traditional classroom observation (Perera & Pathiraja, 2017).

Despite the extensive literature on teacher efficacy, there remains a significant research gap regarding how the dialectic between "safety nets" and "turning points" is qualitatively managed within the LPTK context. Most studies function as a "black box" that only shows the input and output without understanding the qualitative processes within it. Therefore, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of pre-service teachers through a phenomenological lens.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative by Creswell & Poth (2018) approach with a transcendental phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of pre-service teachers within the Teaching Assistant Program (TAP). A qualitative approach was chosen because the purpose of this study is not to measure or count, but rather to understand how and why a process occurs. This aligns with the goal of qualitative inquiry to explore and understand the meaning individuals ascribe to a social or human problem. The phenomenological design of Moustakas was specifically used by researchers to understand the nature of students' life experiences in the phenomenon of developing self-efficacy during the program (Merriam, 2020). By focusing on individual narratives, this approach provides humanistic input into teacher preparation program management.

Participants and Setting The research was conducted within the Faculty of Education at one of the state Islamic campuses in Malang, an institution that strategically manages the TAP as a flagship program to transform prospective teachers. The informants in this study were selected using purposive sampling techniques to select individuals who had the richest understanding and experience related to the phenomenon. To ensure richness of data and observe variations in experiences, the researcher used a maximum variation sampling strategy by selecting eight informants from various study programs, including English Language Education, Mathematics Education, Islamic Religious Education, and Elementary School Teacher Education. These differences in study program backgrounds are important for understanding how the complexity of different

innovation tasks influences the experience of developing self-efficacy. Recruitment was stopped after the eighth informant when data saturation occurred.

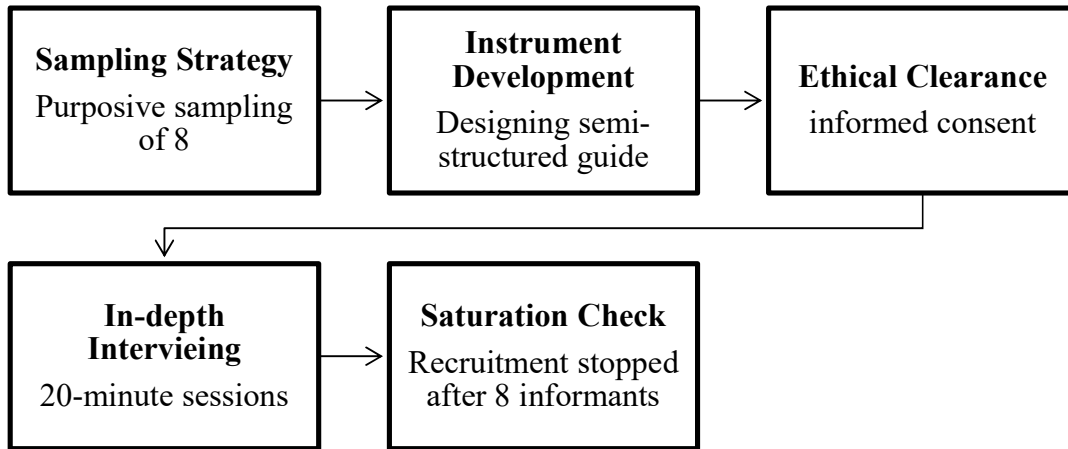


Figure 1. Figure of Data Collection Process

Data Collection and Analysis Primary data for this study was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews where the researcher acted as the key instrument. This guide contained open-ended questions focused on exploring experiences related to the pillars of collaboration. Data analysis used the Thematic Analysis method popularized by Braun & Clarke (2006) to identify patterns of meaning systematically through six rigorous phases. The process involved data introduction, initial coding, theme discovery, theme review, theme definition, and final report creation. To ensure quality and accuracy, the researcher applied four data reliability criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Research Ethics Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the study as an essential component of qualitative inquiry. Data credibility was achieved through triangulation and member checking techniques, ensuring the interpretations reflected the informants' actual meanings. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail, which regularly kept records of all research processes. Confirmability was ensured by basing findings clearly on raw data (informant quotes), minimizing researcher bias, and ensuring that interpretations could be traced back to their sources. All participants were involved voluntarily and their memories were verified immediately after the program ended to ensure detail and accuracy.

Reflexivity The researcher acknowledges their role in exploring and understanding the meaning individuals ascribe to a social problem. By following Van Manen, the researcher chose this design to uncover the structures of awareness and meaning that students construct regarding their collaborative experiences. The focus remained on exploring the depth of meaning, processes, and subjective experiences that cannot be captured by statistical figures. By prioritizing informant narratives, the researcher maintained a balance between academic rigor and the humanistic goal of program management.

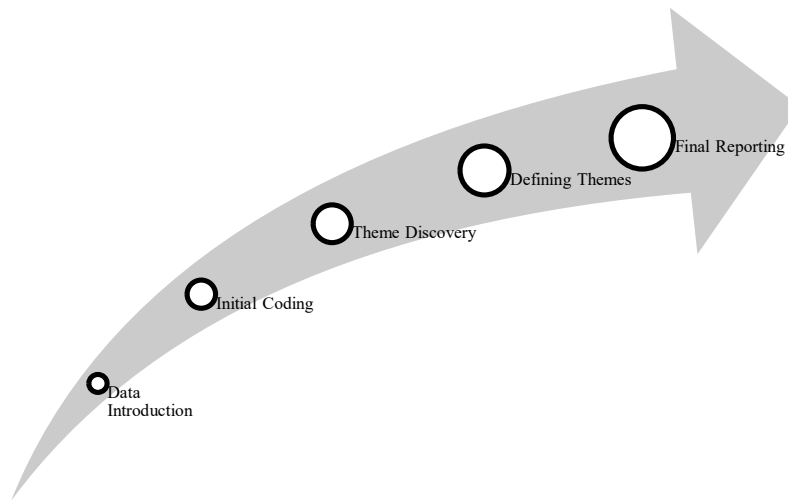


Figure 2. Figure of Thematic Analysis

Research Results and Discussions

The thematic analysis of the eight comprehensive interviews reveals that the Teaching Assistant Program (TAP) functions as a transformative managerial vehicle for forging professional self-efficacy. The findings indicate that self-efficacy does not inherently arise from mere teaching practice, but rather through a complex interplay of social support, personal innovation, and failure reframing equal with study by Huang & Wang (2024), to provide a clear context of the informants, the following table summarizes the demographic and environmental backgrounds of the participants:

Table 1. Participants Demographic and Environmental Backgrounds

Pseudonym	Study Program	Gender	Infrastructure
AR	Islamic Education (PAI)	Male	Standard
FN	English Education (TBI)	Male	Limited
SA	Elementary School Education (PGMI)	Female	Complete
DM	Mathematics (TM)	Male	Standard
IN	Social Studies (PIPS)	Female	Standard

The primary finding universally emerged that collaboration in line with Zhang & Qian (2024), especially with the mentor teacher, serves as a critical psychological safety net for student teachers (Lindström et al., 2024). This encounter transcends mere technical assistance and allows students to venture beyond their theoretical comfort zones to embrace innovative risks. Without this collaborative foundation, many informants reported that anxiety and imposter syndrome would have incapacitated their professional performance (Ferguson & McHenry-Sorber, 2025). Management of these interactions is therefore an essential prerequisite for the overall success of innovation management within the TAP. Qualitative evidence suggests that the initial weeks of the program represent the most vulnerable stage for self-efficacy formation. Mentor interventions, such as providing affirmative feedback like "it's already good," serve as powerful social persuasion that drastically changes student perception (Saepurrohman & Erihadiana,

2024). This confirms the social persuasion pillar in Bandura's (1977) theory, where specific and supportive feedback from a credible source builds confidence. Consequently, effective program management must include formal training for mentors to provide feedback that intentionally fosters psychological readiness.

Beyond vertical mentorship, horizontal collaboration among peers creates an informal but vital community of practice within partner schools this finding confirm research by Pierce (2024), placing students in groups facilitates emotional and instrumental support that acts as a buffer against stress and professional anxiety. One participant (FN, TBI) described a "ritual" of role-playing at their post, where they simulated difficult classroom scenarios to prepare mentally. This group-based management indirectly facilitates three sources of self-efficacy: mastery through practice, social persuasion through mutual criticism, and vicarious experience by observing peer success. Although often not formally managed by the faculty, this horizontal support turned out to be one of the strongest pillars of the program. Faculty management should therefore consciously facilitate these group reflection forums to leverage organic social support. The success of the entire program heavily relies on the quality of these collaborative relationships rather than mere administrative placement. Ultimately, a secure psychological safety net is what allows the demand for innovation to be perceived as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Pedagogical innovation functions as the turning point, where self-efficacy is solidified through authentic mastery experiences. When students successfully execute a methodology or technological tool that elicits a positive response from students, their self-perception shifts from intern to capable teacher (Nousheen et al., 2024). Bandura (1997) identifies these mastery experiences as the most influential and durable source of self-efficacy formation. In the digital era, encouraging students to innovate with technology is not just a curricular goal but a managerial necessity. Informant SA (PGMI) shared a transformative moment when using Quizizz to manage a disruptive elementary class, which provided immediate evidence of their teaching competence. This psychological impact, characterized by the feeling of "wow, I can do this," is at the heart of the efficacy cycle. Mastery in digital innovation provides students with a sense of relevance when facing Gen Z students. Effective program management must therefore explicitly equip and encourage students to take these innovative risks (Flori & Raulea, 2025).

However, the meaning of innovation is highly contextual and depends on the specific complexity of the study program's tasks (Yan, 2025). For a mathematics student (DM, TM), successful innovation was defined by making abstract trigonometric formulas sensible through simple visual props. This reinforces the idea that self-efficacy is task-specific, where a win is measured by student understanding rather than technological flashiness. This finding has profound managerial implications, suggesting that TAP cannot be managed with a one-size-fits-all approach. Evaluation criteria for innovation must be differentiated based on the scientific context of each academic department. Furthermore, in the Islamic education context (PAI), innovation is often perceived as the ability to contextualize religious values to current student issues. Informant AR (PAI) reported that self-efficacy soared when religious material was successfully made relevant to students' mental health. This demonstrates that Islamic identity in teacher training can be a significant driving force for curriculum innovation (Sembiring et al., 2025). Ultimately, LPTKs must encourage students to become innovative curriculum creators rather than mere technical implementers.

A critical theme identified in this study is the cognitive process of reframing failure, particularly regarding student motivation. All informants reported that motivating students was a deeper struggle than mere classroom behavior management (Grigaitė-Bliūmienė, 2024). The sustainable impact of the TAP depends on how students manage the frustration of these inevitable setbacks. Without the ability to reinterpret failure, self-efficacy remains fragile and the program's impact becomes short-term. Early in the program, students tend to internalize failure, viewing low student motivation as a reflection of their own personal inadequacy. Mentor intervention plays a crucial role here, as seen when a mentor reframed a student's sad experience as a welcome to the world of teaching (Stewart-Ginsburg et al., 2024). This cognitive reframing shifts the attribution of failure from internal and stable to a normal professional challenge. Building this resilience ensures that student self-efficacy is not undermined by daily classroom difficulties. Thus, the program's success is not about creating teachers who never fail, but those who know how to respond to failure.

This reframing process is also intrinsically linked to the cycle of innovation itself. When student motivation is low, it often triggers innovative behavior as students seek new ways to engage their class. If the foundation of collaboration and reframing ability is established, these challenges strengthen rather than kill self-efficacy. This highlights an integrated model where sustained efficacy is a dynamic system requiring careful management. TAP management should therefore explicitly include guided reflection sessions to help students process these emotional states. Failure to manage this psychological aspect will result in burnout and low teacher retention after graduation. By helping students reframe failures as opportunities for growth, LPTKs ensure that the efficacy built is durable and sustainable. This professional resilience is what will allow graduates to persist and continue innovating throughout their careers. Ultimately, the program serves as a vehicle to transform theoretical students into reflective and resilient practitioners.

The final theme concerns external contextual factors, specifically the infrastructure gaps at partner schools, which act as barriers to efficacy formation (Dixon et al., 2024). This finding serves as a direct critique of current transformation management within the faculty. Informants described how their enthusiasm for innovation often "hit a wall" when faced with broken or missing facilities. This is a real-world manifestation of Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Causation model, where the environment directly inhibits behavior and cognition. Informant FN (TBI) recounted the frustration of preparing digital materials only to find a broken LCD projector at the school. Such environmental failures are often wrongly attributed to personal failure, which directly attacks the student's nascent self-efficacy (Mangubat et al., 2025). This highlights a serious managerial risk where the faculty's enthusiasm for innovation becomes empty rhetoric without proper facility support. Transformation cannot occur in a constraining environment that hinders the execution of innovative ideas.

The presence of "environmental luck" in placement where some students have access to complete facilities while others do not presents an equity issue. Informant SA (PGMI) acknowledged that her high self-efficacy in technology was largely due to being placed in a well-equipped school. This disparity indicates that the program currently fails to create a sustainable and equitable impact for all students (Wiyanti & Nurjannah, 2025). Graduates end up with uneven levels of technological self-efficacy purely due to placement factors rather than their actual potential. Faculty management must therefore move beyond relational proximity in school partnerships and conduct rigorous readiness

audits. If minimum facility standards cannot be met, the faculty is responsible for providing solutions, such as lending portable devices to students. Without intervention at this environmental level, the innovation pillar will collapse for a significant portion of the student body. Overall, managing the transformation of teacher education through the TAP requires a comprehensive psychological and environmental intervention strategy.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the Teaching Assistant Program (TAP) is a potent transformative vehicle for developing teacher self-efficacy, provided it is managed as a comprehensive psychological intervention rather than a mere administrative placement. The findings demonstrate that self-efficacy is forged through a dynamic interplay between safety nets and turning points. While pedagogical innovation serves as the primary catalyst for mastery experiences, its success is fundamentally dependent on the psychological safety net provided by robust, constructive collaboration with mentors and peers. Without this managed support system, the demand for innovation risks becoming a source of anxiety rather than growth.

Furthermore, the sustainability of this efficacy is rooted in professional resilience, achieved through the systematic cognitive reframing of classroom failures. Students who learn to interpret setbacks as professional challenges rather than personal defects demonstrate higher persistence. However, the management of LPTKs must urgently address the critical barrier of infrastructure disparity among partner schools, which currently threatens the equity of student experiences. To ensure a sustainable impact, it is recommended that teacher education institutions standardize mentor support protocols, facilitate structured reflection sessions to aid cognitive reframing, and provide portable technological resources for students placed in schools with limited facilities. Ultimately, effective TAP management must balance the technical demands of innovation with the psychological needs of pre-service teachers to produce resilient and adaptive future educators.

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