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Self-Worth Protection Mechanisms of Pre-Service Teachers: Basis for An Intervention Program

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigated the self-worth protection mechanisms of pre-service teachers at Southern Capital Colleges, Oroquieta City, during the School Year 2025–2026. Using a descriptive-comparative research design, data were gathered to determine respondents' profiles, levels of self-worth protection mechanisms, and significant differences when grouped according to selected variables. Findings revealed that pre-service teachers demonstrated moderate levels of self-handicapping, defensive pessimism, excuse-making, withdrawal or avoidance, and effort reduction. Significant differences were observed when respondents were grouped by year level, academic standing, and parents' educational background. The results underscore the need for intervention programs that strengthen adaptive coping strategies and self-worth among pre-service teachers.

Keywords: academic standing, adaptive coping, pre-service teachers, self-worth protection mechanisms, teacher education

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Introduction

Pre-service teachers are students enrolled in teacher education programs who undergo academic preparation, field study, and teaching internship before entering the teaching profession. These experiences expose them to academic demands, performance evaluations, practicum requirements, and expectations from mentors and peers. Consequently, they need not only pedagogical competence but also effective strategies for managing motivation, emotions, and perceived threats to their competence. In this context, self-worth protection mechanisms refer to strategies individuals use to preserve their sense of competence and personal value when faced with failure, negative evaluation, or challenging situations (Ochotorena, 2018).

Self-worth protection is closely associated with self-regulated learning, which enables pre-service teachers to manage their goals, motivation, emotions, and behaviors. Mngomezulu et al. (2024) and Dettori et al. (2006) emphasized the importance of self-regulation in maintaining motivation and commitment, while Huang et al. (2022) highlighted the role of metacognitive awareness, feedback, and goal setting. These processes are particularly relevant to teacher preparation, where pre-service teachers continuously encounter academic and professional challenges.

The theoretical foundation of self-worth protection is rooted in Covington's (1984) Self-Worth Theory, which proposes that individuals strive to maintain their sense of worth and may employ defensive strategies when their competence is threatened. Such strategies may include self-handicapping, avoidance, procrastination, and other protective behaviors. Ochotorena (2018) found that pre-service teachers use self-worth protection strategies to maintain their sense of competence, while Yavuzer (2015), as cited by Ochotorena (2018), associated low self-worth with self-handicapping behaviors. Recent studies similarly indicate that fear of negative evaluation, anxiety, low expectations of success, and performance pressure may increase the likelihood of self-worth protective behaviors among pre-service teachers (Barkela et al., 2024; Uygun & Inal, 2024).

The literature further suggests that self-worth is influenced by self-efficacy, self-esteem, social support, and practicum experiences. Supportive relationships, constructive feedback, and opportunities for mastery may promote healthier responses to academic challenges (Garcia-Lazaro et al., 2022; Depping et al., 2024; Marcu & Huh-Yoo, 2023). Conversely, when self-worth becomes heavily dependent on academic success, individuals may become more vulnerable to distress, avoidance, and burnout (Ischizu et al., 2022; Lavrijsen et al., 2023). These findings highlight the importance of understanding how pre-service teachers protect their self-worth while developing their academic competence and professional identity.

Despite these findings, limited research has specifically examined self-worth protection mechanisms among pre-service teachers in the Philippine context, particularly their relationship with academic performance. Existing studies have largely focused on academic stress, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and performance anxiety, leaving a need to examine specific mechanisms such as internal and external protection, fear of negative evaluation, and risk avoidance. This gap is important because understanding these mechanisms may help teacher education institutions identify maladaptive behaviors and develop appropriate interventions.

Therefore, the present study examines the self-worth protection mechanisms of pre-service teachers at Southern Capital Colleges. Specifically, it assesses their levels of self-worth protection and academic performance, examines differences according to selected profile variables, and proposes an evidence-based intervention program. The findings are expected to provide useful information for strengthening mentoring, feedback practices, psychological support, resilience, and professional preparation among future teachers.

Methods

The study employed a descriptive-correlational research design to examine the self-worth protection mechanisms of 74 pre-service teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Elementary Education program at Southern Capital Colleges during School Year 2025–2026. The descriptive component determined the levels of self-worth protection across identified dimensions, while the correlational component examined their relationship with academic performance. The study also analyzed differences according to selected profile variables, including gender, year level, general weighted mean, parents' occupation and educational background, and family income. This design was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to examine the variables as they naturally occurred without manipulation and provided an empirical basis for developing an intervention

program to promote adaptive coping and minimize maladaptive self-worth protection behaviors.

Results and Discussions

Table 1

Summary of Self-Worth Protection Mechanisms Demonstrated by Pre-Service Teachers

Self-Worth Protection Mechanism	Overall Weighted Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Description
Self-Handicapping	2.91	0.79	Agree
Defensive Pessimism	3.28	0.65	Agree
Excuse-Making	2.88	0.79	Agree
Withdrawal or Avoidance	2.89	0.76	Agree
Effort Reduction	3.16	0.68	Agree
Grand Mean	3.02	0.73	Agree

This table presents the summary of the self-worth protection mechanisms demonstrated by pre-service teachers of Southern Capital Colleges, Oroquieta City, for the School Year 2025–2026. As shown in the table, all five dimensions of self-worth protection mechanisms obtained verbal interpretations of Agree, with a grand mean of 3.02 and a standard deviation of 0.73, indicating a moderate level of engagement in self-worth protection strategies among the respondents. Among the dimensions, Defensive Pessimism registered the highest overall weighted mean of 3.28, followed by Effort Reduction with a mean of 3.16, while Excuse-Making recorded the lowest mean of 2.88.

The table revealed that pre-service teachers consistently employ various self-worth protection mechanisms, with a greater tendency toward strategies that involve preparation, effort regulation, and anticipatory coping rather than overt avoidance or blame-shifting. This pattern implies that respondents are actively managing academic pressure and performance expectations through mechanisms that help preserve their self-esteem while maintaining engagement in academic tasks. The prominence of defensive pessimism and effort regulation suggests that many pre-service teachers adopt cautious yet goal-directed approaches to academic challenges, allowing them to balance self-protection with performance enhancement. However, the presence of all five mechanisms also indicates the need to distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive forms of self-worth protection.

The results are supported by Covington’s Self-Worth Theory of Achievement Motivation (1992), which posits that students employ a range of self-protective strategies to safeguard their sense of competence in evaluative settings. Additionally, Lazarus and Folkman’s Transactional Model of Stress and Coping explains that individuals continuously appraise stressors and select coping responses that regulate emotional outcomes. Empirical studies by Urdan (2004) and Martin, Marsh, and Debus (2001) support the notion that moderate engagement in self-worth protection mechanisms can be adaptive when paired with active coping and effort. In the Philippine context, a study by Garcia and De Guzman (2020) found that pre-service teachers frequently utilize self-protective strategies to manage academic stress while striving to meet professional standards. These findings are consistent with the present results and underscore the importance of developing intervention programs that strengthen adaptive coping, self-awareness, and resilience while minimizing reliance on maladaptive self-worth protection behaviors among pre-service teachers.

Table 2

Test of Significant Difference in the Self-Worth Protection Mechanisms of Pre-Service Teachers When Grouped According to Profile Variables

Profile Variable	Test Used	Computed Value	p-value	Decision ($\alpha = 0.05$)	Interpretation
Gender	Independent Samples t-test	$t = 1.27$	0.207	Fail to Reject H_0	No significant difference
Year Level	One-Way ANOVA	$F = 3.84$	0.015	Reject H_0	Significant difference

Profile Variable	Test Used	Computed Value	p-value	Decision ($\alpha = 0.05$)	Interpretation
General Weighted Mean (Academic Standing)	One-Way ANOVA	F = 4.21	0.009	Reject Ho	Significant difference
Parent's Current Occupation	One-Way ANOVA	F = 1.46	0.198	Fail to Reject Ho	No significant difference
Family Monthly Income	One-Way ANOVA	F = 2.09	0.086	Fail to Reject Ho	No significant difference
Parents' Educational Background	One-Way ANOVA	F = 2.67	0.041	Reject Ho	Significant difference

This table presents the test of significant difference in the self-worth protection mechanisms of pre-service teachers when grouped according to selected profile variables, namely gender, year level, general weighted mean (academic standing), parents' current occupation, family monthly income, and parents' educational background. The statistical analyses employed include the Independent Samples t-test for gender and One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for the remaining variables. As reflected in the table, the computed p-values indicate that year level ($p = 0.015$), general weighted mean ($p = 0.009$), and parents' educational background ($p = 0.041$) show significant differences at the 0.05 level of significance, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis for these variables. In contrast, gender ($p = 0.207$), parents' current occupation ($p = 0.198$), and family monthly income ($p = 0.086$) yielded no significant differences, resulting in the failure to reject the null hypothesis for these profile variables.

The table revealed that self-worth protection mechanisms vary significantly based on respondents' academic and developmental characteristics rather than demographic or purely economic factors. This pattern implies that pre-service teachers' year level and academic standing play a crucial role in shaping how they protect their self-worth, as students at different stages of their academic journey and performance levels encounter varying degrees of academic pressure, expectations, and evaluative stress. Likewise, the significant difference observed when grouped according to parents' educational background suggests that family academic culture and exposure to educational values influence students' coping behaviors and self-perceptions. On the other hand, the absence of significant differences across gender, parental occupation, and family income implies that self-worth protection mechanisms are not strongly determined by sex or economic status alone, but are more closely linked to educational experiences and cognitive-emotional development within the academic environment.

The results are supported by Covington's Self-Worth Theory of Achievement Motivation (1992), which posits that students' self-protective behaviors are highly sensitive to achievement contexts and performance-related feedback rather than fixed demographic traits. Furthermore, Chickering's Theory of Identity Development explains that students' coping strategies and self-concept evolve as they progress through different academic levels, supporting the significant differences observed across year levels. Research by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) also confirms that academic experiences and institutional exposure significantly influence students' psychological adjustment and coping mechanisms. In relation to parental education, Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital emphasizes that parents' educational background shapes students' academic dispositions, confidence, and response to evaluative situations. Local studies, such as that of Bernardo and King (2019), found that Filipino college students' coping strategies differ significantly based on academic standing and parental educational attainment. These findings are consistent with the present results and underscore the need for intervention programs that are developmentally responsive, academically sensitive, and family-context aware to effectively strengthen adaptive self-worth and coping mechanisms among pre-service teachers.

Conclusions

This study concludes that pre-service teachers of Southern Capital Colleges, Oroquieta City demonstrate a moderate level of self-worth protection mechanisms, which they employ as coping strategies to manage academic demands and performance-related pressures. Despite coming largely from economically disadvantaged families with parents of limited educational attainment, the respondents generally exhibited strong academic performance, indicating resilience and commitment to their professional preparation. The

significant differences in self-worth protection mechanisms when grouped according to year level, academic standing, and parents' educational background suggest that educational experiences and developmental stages play a more critical role in shaping coping behaviors than demographic or economic factors. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening adaptive self-worth and coping strategies among pre-service teachers to support their academic success, emotional well-being, and readiness for the teaching profession.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, pre-service teachers are encouraged to strengthen self-awareness and develop adaptive coping strategies through reflective practices, goal setting, stress management, mentoring, and peer support, while teacher education faculty are encouraged to integrate psychosocial support, growth mindset, emotional regulation, and resilience-building activities into their instruction. School administrators and guidance counselors are likewise encouraged to implement structured programs addressing self-worth, stress management, and mental well-being through counseling, wellness seminars, academic-resilience workshops, and group guidance sessions. Higher education institutions should strengthen accessible counseling, academic advising, and wellness services, particularly for students who may require greater academic and social support, while promoting an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to conduct studies using larger samples, mixed-methods or longitudinal designs and to examine related factors such as self-efficacy, academic motivation, mental health, and teaching self-concept, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programs designed to promote adaptive coping and healthy self-worth among pre-service teachers.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

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