

# Psychological Drivers of Innovative Work Behavior and Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer among Young Higher Vocational Teachers: An Empirical Analysis towards the Sustainable Development of Higher Vocational Education in China\*



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## Abstract

In the context of sustainable development, innovative work behavior has become the core driving force for achieving high-quality and continuous innovation in higher vocational education. As an important subject of innovation in higher vocational education, the psychological driving factors of young teacher and intergenerational knowledge transfer paths have significant strategic value and practical implications for the sustainable development of the higher vocational education system. The research objectives are as follows: 1) to examine the impact of occupational self-efficacy on intrinsic motivation and innovative work behavior (inside and outside the classroom) among young higher vocational college teachers; 2) to examine the role of intrinsic motivation in enhancing innovative work behavior among young higher vocational college teachers both inside and outside the classroom; 3) to examine how the willingness of intergenerational learning influences offline and online intergenerational knowledge transfer among young higher vocational college teachers; 4) to examine the effect of offline and online intergenerational knowledge transfer on inside-classroom and outside-classroom innovative work behavior among young higher vocational college teachers. The study employed structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze questionnaire data from 430 participants. Results provided empirical support for all 11 research hypotheses at statistically significant levels.

The findings revealed that 1) occupational self-efficacy has significant positive impact on intrinsic motivation and innovative work behavior (inside and outside the classroom); 2) intrinsic motivation has significant positive impact on innovative work behavior among young higher vocational college teachers both inside and outside the classroom; 3) willingness of intergenerational learning influences has significant positive impact on offline and online intergenerational knowledge transfer; 4) offline and online intergenerational knowledge transfer has significant positive impact on inside-classroom and outside-classroom innovative work behavior among young higher vocational college teachers.

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## Introduction

As China's economy moves towards a new stage of high-quality development, the innovation-driven strategy has become the country's core development path, leading to the demand for high-quality technical and skilled talents continuing to grow (Fan, 2020). As an important part of China's vocational education system, higher vocational colleges shoulder the important mission of cultivating applied talents for industrial transformation and social progress (Gao, and Zhang, 2020). In response to the urgent requirements of industrial upgrading and technological innovation, the Chinese government continues to promote the reform of higher vocational education, paying special attention to the construction of a "dual-qualified" teaching team, aiming to improve teachers' practical teaching ability and innovation literacy (Liu, and Zhou, 2019; Wang, Peng, and Zheng, 2023). This series of measures not only strengthens the connotation construction of higher vocational education but also lays a solid foundation for the sustainable development of China's higher vocational education. By optimizing the talent training model, deepening the integration of industry and education, and promoting the professionalization of the teaching staff, higher vocational colleges are actively contributing to China's green economic transformation and long-term social development, and achieving a high degree of matching between talent training and industrial needs.

Although the government has introduced a series of policies to support the professional growth of higher vocational teachers (Liu, and Zhou, 2019), the current teaching staff of higher vocational colleges faces structural challenges. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education of China (2022), more than half of higher vocational teachers are under 40 years old, and young teachers occupy a dominant position. However, entered teaching positions directly after graduating from colleges and universities many young vocational teachers lack industrial practical experience. Although they have a solid theoretical foundation, their practical application ability is obviously insufficient (Liu, and Zhou, 2019). This situation has led to a disconnect between theory and practice, making it difficult to meet the core goal of higher vocational education to apply acquired knowledge in the real world.

As an important promoter of higher vocational education reform, teachers' innovative work behavior directly affects students' practical ability training and education quality (Liu, Liu, Xu, and Li, 2023). Existing research shows that psychological factors have a significant impact on teachers' innovative work behavior (Messmann, 2012; Klaijnsen, Vermeulen, and Martens, 2018). Among them, occupational self-efficacy not only affects teachers' confidence and persistence in facing challenges, but also significantly promotes their intrinsic motivation, which in turn stimulates innovative work behavior (Bawuro et al., 2020; Klaijnsen, Vermeulen,



and Martens, 2018). In addition, intrinsic motivation, as an important psychological driving force for innovative work behavior, is closely related to teachers' active practice and continuous improvement in the education field (Loogma, Kruusvall, and Ümarik, 2012; Messmann, 2012). It is worth noting that young vocational teachers, in the absence of industry experience, often need to make up for their lack of practical ability through intergenerational knowledge transfer (IGKT) with senior experienced teachers (Wang, Zuo, and An, 2017; Lu, and Sun, 2021). Empirical study has confirmed that both face-to-face offline intergenerational knowledge transfer and online intergenerational knowledge transfer based on information technology can effectively improve the innovative work behavior of young employees (Sun, 2021). In the context of higher vocational education, how young teachers can acquire practical experience through intergenerational knowledge and promote teaching innovation has become an issue that needs to be explored in depth.

However, although relevant foreign research is relatively mature (Messmann, 2012; Klaijnsen, Vermeulen, and Martens, 2018; Bawuro et al., 2020), the existing literature still has obvious deficiencies in the field of higher vocational education in China. Current domestic research focuses on the "dual-qualified" teacher training policy and teaching team building (Huang et al., 2021), but there is still a lack of systematic empirical verification of the internal mechanism between individual psychological factors of young teachers and innovative work behavior. In particular, the dynamic relationship between young teachers' willingness for intergenerational learning, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and innovative work behavior has not been fully explored. Most of the existing literature is based on qualitative interviews or policy interpretations, lacks rigorous quantitative model support, and lacks distinction between online and offline knowledge transfer paths.

In the context of the continuous deepening of reforms in higher vocational education and the Chinese vigorous promotion of a sustainable talent training system, young vocational teachers, as the main force of teaching, have a fundamental impact on the realization of educational sustainability through their innovative work behavior (Fan, 2020). However, at present, there are problems in higher vocational colleges where young vocational teachers lack industry experience and insufficient practical teaching ability, which seriously restricts the quality of higher vocational education and the employment competitiveness of graduates (Liu, and Zhou, 2019). Although some studies have confirmed the positive impact of occupational self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation on innovative work behavior (Klaijnsen, Vermeulen, and Martens, 2018), most of the research conducted in Europe, and quantitative empirical research on young teachers in higher vocational colleges in China is still scarce. More importantly, the current literature has not systematically integrated the interactive paths of psychological factors (occupational self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and willingness of intergenerational learning) and intergenerational knowledge transfer (offline and online), nor has it fully revealed the whole process of young teachers promoting knowledge transfer through learning

willingness and thus affecting innovative work behavior. Research on this issue not only has important theoretical value for improving teachers' innovation work behavior and promoting sustainable development of higher vocational education, but also has important practical significance for policy makers and college administrators in designing teacher development paths and building intergenerational learning mechanisms.

### Objectives of the Research

1. To examine the impact of occupational self-efficacy on intrinsic motivation and innovative work behavior (inside and outside the classroom) among young higher vocational college teachers.
2. To examine the role of intrinsic motivation in enhancing innovative work behavior among young higher vocational college teachers both inside and outside the classroom.
3. To examine how the willingness of intergenerational learning influences offline and online intergenerational knowledge transfer among young higher vocational college teachers.
4. To examine the effect of offline and online intergenerational knowledge transfer on inside-classroom and outside-classroom innovative work behavior among young higher vocational college teachers.

### Research Methodology

This study systematically investigated the psychological factors of innovation and development of young Chinese higher vocational college teachers, focusing on the influence of occupational self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, willingness of intergenerational learning, and intergenerational knowledge transfer on young Chinese higher vocational college teachers' innovative work behavior. The specific research processes are as follows:

**The 1<sup>st</sup> Step:** The first step of the study is to review and sort out relevant theories and literatures on occupational self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, innovative work behavior, and intergenerational knowledge transfer to lay the foundation for the research framework.

**The 2<sup>nd</sup> step:** The second step of the study, based on the previous literature review, combined social cognitive theory and self-determination theory to construct a research framework with occupational self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and willingness of intergenerational learning as the core research constructs, and explored the mechanism by which these variables jointly influence the innovative work behavior of young teachers in and outside the classroom through online and offline intergenerational knowledge transfer paths.

**The 3<sup>rd</sup> step:**

1. Population of interest and target samples: the target population of this study is young teachers under the age of 40 in higher vocational colleges in mainland China. This group is not only the backbone of the future sustainable development of higher vocational colleges, but also has a far-reaching impact on the sustainable development of the education system



and social economy. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2022), 56.61% of full-time teachers in higher vocational colleges are under 40 years old, indicating that young teachers are rapidly becoming the main body of higher vocational education. Therefore, focusing on young teachers under the age of 40 and exploring their psychological driving factors and intergenerational knowledge transfer paths will not only contribute to the sustainable development of higher vocational colleges themselves, but also have important theoretical and practical significance for supporting the construction of a national high-quality vocational education system and sustainable progress in the social economy.

2. Sample size and sampling technique: This study employs allocation sampling to ensure a proportional and representative distribution of vocational teachers across different provinces in Mainland China. The allocation is based on the latest Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2022) data on full-time teachers in higher vocational colleges. To determine the minimum required sample size, Cochran's (1977) formula was applied. Based on Cochran's (1977) formula, at least 385 respondents are required to ensure statistical validity. However, to increase statistical power, account for potential non-responses, and enhance the generalizability of findings, a total of 600 questionnaires will be distributed across provinces using a proportionate allocation sampling technique.

**The 4<sup>th</sup> step:** This study applies a structured questionnaire as the main research instrument, and the questionnaire is divided into three parts. The first part is a screening question, which is used to confirm whether the respondents meet the research object standards, that is, whether they are young teachers in higher vocational colleges under the age of 40 in mainland China. Only those who meet the conditions can continue to answer the questionnaire. The second part is a survey of the basic information of the respondents, including six questions: the region of the higher vocational college, actual age of the respondents, gender, educational level, professional title, and type of courses the respondent taught. The third part is the core scale question, which applies a five-point Likert scale to measure seven variables related to this study. All scale questions refer to high-quality academic literature, and some items are appropriately adjusted according to the context of this study to ensure the reliability and validity of the scale. Specifically, the measurement scale items of occupational self-efficacy are used the occupational self-efficacy that created by Schyns, and von Collani (2002). The 6-item Occupational Self-Efficacy originated from Schyns, and von Collani (2002) has been proved to be reliable and validity in various context. The measurement scale items of intrinsic motivation are the 7-item interest/enjoyment scale that was developed by Deci, and Ryan (1985). In general, the 7-item interest/enjoyment scale is treated as the measurement of intrinsic motivation. The measurement scale items of willingness of intergenerational learning are the 6 scale items that were proposed by Lu, and Sun (2021). To specifically measure the innovative work behavior of young higher vocational

teachers, this research adopts Messmann's (2012) validated scales. The 5-item vocational teacher innovative work behavior scale for inside the classroom and the 4-item vocational teacher innovative work behavior scale for outside the classroom were both tested for validity and reliability.

**The 5<sup>th</sup> step:** This study employed a stratified proportional sampling method, distributing 600 questionnaires proportional to the number of higher vocational teachers in each province to ensure a representative sample. In the first phase, the sample was allocated proportionally to the number of higher vocational teachers in each province. In the second phase, full-time teachers under the age of 40 were randomly selected from each province. Data were collected using the Wenjuanxing platform, with screening questions to enhance data validity and accuracy.

**The 6<sup>th</sup> step:** This study used SPSS and AMOS for data processing and statistical analysis. The analysis methods included descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation model (SEM) analysis. First, descriptive statistics were used to understand the basic characteristics of the respondents, and Cronbach's alpha was used to test the reliability of the research scale to ensure the internal consistency of each dimension. Subsequently, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to confirm the validity of the scale structure and to test the convergent validity and discriminant validity of the research instrument. Finally, the structural equation model (SEM) was used to conduct an overall path analysis of the research hypothesis, verify the relationship between the research variables.

**The 7<sup>th</sup> step:** Systematically summary and presentation of the research results.

## Research Results

From the 1<sup>st</sup> objective, the research result was found that occupational self-efficacy has a significant positive impact on intrinsic motivation (standardized  $\beta=0.486$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). This means that when the young vocational college teacher's occupational self-efficacy increases by 1 standard deviation unit, intrinsic motivation will increase by 0.486 standard deviation units accordingly. The standardized path coefficient of occupational self-efficacy on inside classroom innovative work behavior is  $\beta=0.148$ , which is statistically significant ( $p<0.01$ ). This result indicates that teacher's occupational self-efficacy increases by one standard deviation unit, the innovative work behavior they exhibit in the classroom will increase by 0.148 standard deviation units, suggesting the direct role of occupational self-efficacy in promoting inside classroom innovation. The standardized path coefficient of occupational self-efficacy on outside classroom innovative work behavior is  $\beta=0.323$ , and the p value is less than 0.001, indicating that the path is highly significant. This means that for every standard deviation unit increase in occupational self-efficacy, the outside classroom innovative behavior will increase significantly by 0.323 standard deviation units.



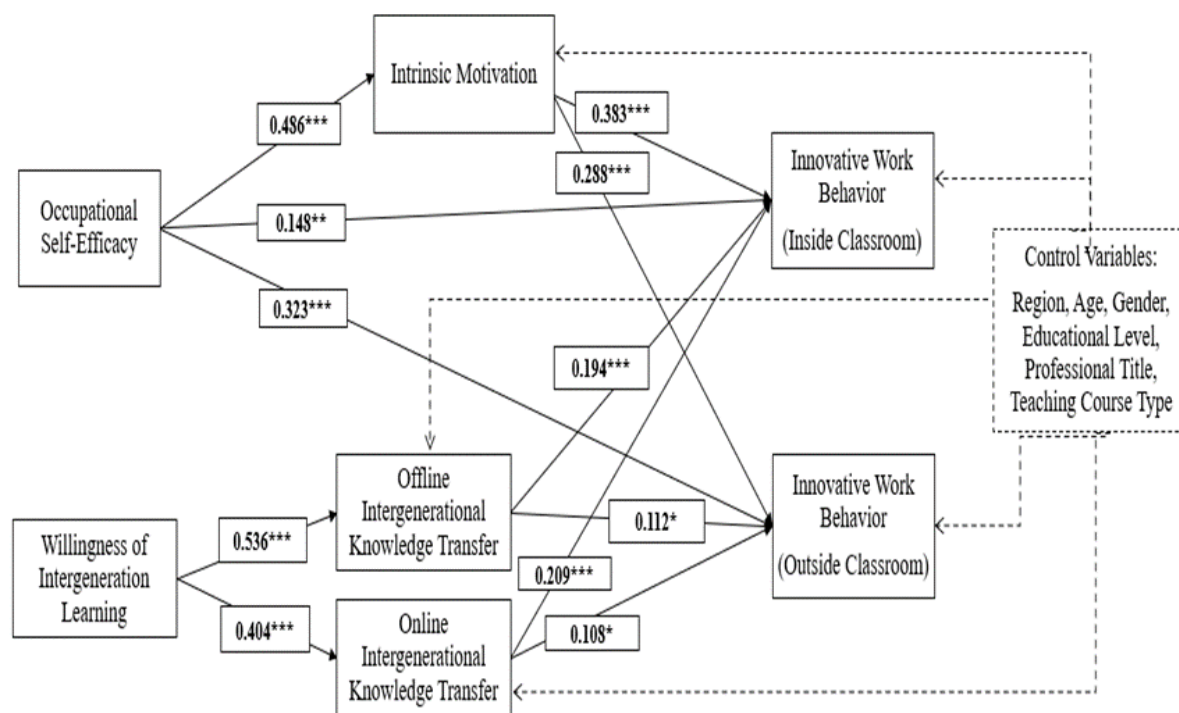
From the 2<sup>nd</sup> objective, the research result was found that intrinsic motivation on inside classroom innovative work behavior is statistically significant (standardized path coefficient  $\beta=0.383$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). This means that when the intrinsic motivation of young vocational college teachers increases by 1 standard deviation unit, the level of their innovative work behavior inside the classroom will increase by 0.383 standard deviation unit accordingly. In addition, the results of the structural equation model (SEM) analysis reveal that the positive impact of intrinsic motivation on outside classroom innovative work behavior is statistically significant ( $\beta=0.288$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). This means that when the intrinsic motivation of teachers increases by one standard deviation unit, their innovative behavior outside the classroom will also increase significantly by 0.288 standard deviation units.

From the 3<sup>rd</sup> objective, the research result was found that the standardized path coefficient of willingness of intergenerational learning to offline intergenerational knowledge transfer is  $\beta=0.536$ , and it is highly significant in statistics ( $p<0.001$ ). This result shows that when the willingness of intergenerational learning of young teachers increases by one standard deviation unit, their offline intergenerational knowledge transfer behavior will increase by about 0.536 standard deviation units, showing a strong positive driving effect. Additionally, the standardized path coefficient of willingness of intergenerational learning on online intergenerational knowledge transfer is  $\beta=0.404$ , which is statistically significant ( $p<0.001$ ). This coefficient indicates that for every standard deviation unit increase in willingness of intergenerational learning, the online intergenerational knowledge transfer of young teachers in higher vocational colleges will increase by about 0.404 standard deviation units.

From the 4<sup>th</sup> objective, the research result was found that the standardized path coefficient of offline intergenerational knowledge transfer on IWBI is  $\beta=0.194$ , with a significance level of  $p<0.001$ . This coefficient indicates that for every standard deviation unit increase in offline intergenerational knowledge transfer, the inside classroom innovative work behavior of young teachers will increase by about 0.194 standard deviation units. In addition, the standardized path coefficient of offline intergenerational knowledge transfer on innovative work behavior outside the classroom is  $\beta=0.112$ , reaching a statistically significant level ( $p<0.05$ ). This coefficient means that for every standard deviation unit increase in offline intergenerational knowledge transfer, the innovative work behavior outside the classroom of young teachers will increase by about 0.112 standard deviation units.

## The New Body of Knowledge





\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ .

**Figure 1:** Diagram of Structural Equation Modeling,

This study constructed a systematic model to promote innovative work behavior of young teachers in higher vocational colleges as a new knowledge system of this study. It integrated the core elements of social cognitive theory and self-determination theory, combined with the actual path of intergenerational knowledge transfer, and comprehensively revealed the key psychological factors and inheritance mechanisms that affect the innovative work behavior of young teachers in higher vocational colleges. The study found that occupational self-efficacy not only directly and significantly affects teachers' innovative work behavior inside and outside the classroom, but also indirectly promotes innovative work behavior by enhancing teachers' intrinsic motivation. In addition, young teachers' willingness of intergenerational learning also plays a key role in the knowledge inheritance path, among which the impact on offline intergenerational knowledge transfer is the most significant, and it also has a strong driving force for online intergenerational knowledge transfer, and these knowledge transfer paths further promote teachers' innovative performance inside and outside teaching. The new model proposed by the research can be used as a practical guide for the development of college teachers, organizational management and policy formulation. In practice, it is recommended that universities strengthen mechanisms for cultivating young teachers' professional confidence (e.g., training, career advancement systems), create a teaching environment that supports the development of intrinsic motivation (emphasizing autonomy, competence, and a sense of belonging), and establish systematic intergenerational collaboration platforms (e.g., offline mentoring systems and online knowledge-sharing





communities). This will foster a positive mechanism for knowledge transfer and innovation incentives, promoting individual growth, organizational innovation, and the high-quality, sustainable development of the education system. This knowledge system not only makes theoretical contributions but also provides empirical support and highly practical guidance for higher vocational education reform and teacher team building.

## Discussion of Research Results

From the research result of the 1<sup>st</sup> objective, it was found that occupational self-efficacy has a significant positive impact on the intrinsic motivation of young higher vocational teachers and also significantly predicts their innovative work behaviors both inside and outside the classroom. This is because teachers with higher occupational self-efficacy are more confident in completing teaching tasks and tackling professional challenges, and they derive a greater sense of meaning and autonomy from their work, which in turn stimulates their intrinsic motivation and further promotes their enthusiasm for teaching reform and institutional innovation. This finding is consistent with the concepts, theories, and research work of Bandura (1977), Deci, and Ryan (1985), Rigotti, Schyns, and Mohr, (2008), and Klaijnsen, Vermeulen, and Martens, (2018), all of which suggest that an individual's belief in their own abilities directly influences their motivation and behavior.

From the research result of the 2<sup>nd</sup> objective, it was found that intrinsic motivation has a significant positive impact on the innovative work behavior of young higher vocational teachers, both in and out of the classroom. This is because when teachers experience interest, enjoyment, and a sense of value in their teaching, they are more likely to proactively experiment with new teaching methods, assessment tools, and curriculum reforms, which in turn enhances the innovation and effectiveness of their educational practices. This finding is consistent with the concepts, theories, and research of Deci and Ryan (1985), Messmann (2012), and Klaijnsen, Vermeulen, and Martens (2018), all of which demonstrate that intrinsic motivation is a key factor driving educators' innovative practices. Within the classroom, intrinsic motivation inspires teachers to adopt more experimental and interactive teaching methods; beyond the classroom, intrinsic motivation drives teachers to participate in innovative activities such as curriculum development, industry-university collaboration, and academic research, resulting in greater professional influence and institutional contributions (Bawuro et al., 2020).

From the research result of the 3<sup>rd</sup> objective, it was found that the willingness of intergenerational learning among young higher vocational teachers has a significant positive impact on both offline and online intergenerational knowledge transfer. This is because individuals with a high level of learning willingness are more likely to actively seek knowledge exchange and experience transfer with older teachers, which in turn enhances their teaching abilities and professional qualities. This finding is consistent with the concepts, theories, and research of Bu (2013) and Lu, and Sun (2021), which suggest that the willingness of

intergenerational learning, as a psychological trait encompassing cognitive, affective, and intentional dimensions, can effectively drive individuals to engage in deep knowledge interaction.

From the research result of the 4<sup>th</sup> objective, it was found that both offline and online intergenerational knowledge transfer significantly and positively predicted young higher vocational teachers' innovative work behaviors both inside and outside the classroom. This is because different forms of knowledge transfer facilitate the acquisition and reconstruction of teachers' implicit and explicit knowledge, which in turn enhances their ability to innovate in teaching and institutions. This finding is consistent with the concepts, theories, and research of Nonaka, and Takeuchi (1995), Geeraerts, Vanhoof, and Van den Bossche, (2016), Zhang, and Venkatesh (2013), and Wang, Dong, Ye, and Feng, (2023). In offline settings, knowledge transfer promotes the processes of "socialization" and "externalization," enabling teachers to absorb implicit knowledge through face-to-face interaction and teaching observation and transform it into innovations in classroom design and interaction methods (Sun, 2021). Online knowledge transfer, on the other hand, facilitates teachers to acquire structured explicit knowledge within flexible timeframes through "combination" and "internalization," applying it in practical teaching, which in turn promotes cross-organizational collaboration and the integration of educational resources (Wang, Dong, Ye, and Feng, 2023).

## Conclusion

This study systematically verified the key influencing paths of innovative work behaviors of young teachers in higher vocational colleges through structural equation model analysis. The results showed that occupational self-efficacy had a significant positive impact on intrinsic motivation and directly promoted teachers' innovative behaviors inside and outside the classroom. Additionally, intrinsic motivation had a significant driving effect on innovative work behaviors inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, the willingness of intergenerational learning significantly affected offline and online intergenerational knowledge transfer behaviors, while offline knowledge transfer had a positive impact on innovative work behaviors inside and outside the classroom, respectively. The study revealed the mechanism by which psychological motivation and knowledge inheritance jointly drive the innovative work behaviors of young teachers.

## Suggestions

### 1. The suggestions from the research

From the research result of the 1<sup>st</sup> objective, it was found that occupational self-efficacy has a significant positive impact on intrinsic motivation, innovative work behavior inside the classroom, and innovative work behavior outside the classroom. Therefore, the related institute should apply as follows: 1) Higher vocational colleges and teacher



development centers should regularly carry out professional growth training for teachers to strengthen their professional ability and role identity. 2) It is recommended to introduce a teacher mentor system and a peer teaching support system to enhance the self-efficacy of young teachers. 3) Periodic teaching achievement displays or competitions can be set up to enhance teachers' self-confidence and sense of professional achievement, which in turn promotes their teaching innovation behavior.

From the research result of the 2<sup>nd</sup> objective, it was found that intrinsic motivation has a significant positive impact on both inside-classroom innovation work behavior and outside-classroom innovation work behavior. Therefore, the related institute should apply as follows: 1) Education administrators should create a work environment that supports autonomy, competence, and belonging to stimulate teachers' intrinsic motivation. 2) It is recommended to provide teachers with opportunities for curriculum design autonomy, participation in teaching reform projects, and academic development. 3) A teacher honor system or intrinsic incentive mechanism can be established to enhance teachers' intrinsic sense of achievement and motivation for continuous investment.

From the research result of the 3<sup>rd</sup> objective, it was found that the willingness of intergenerational learning has a significant positive effect on both offline intergenerational knowledge transfer and online intergenerational knowledge transfer. Therefore, the related institute should apply as follows: 1) Higher vocational colleges should establish a mentorship program to promote knowledge and experience transfer between senior and younger teachers. 2) It is recommended to set up online teaching communities or knowledge sharing platforms (such as WeChat teaching groups, online lesson preparation meetings) to enhance the efficiency of online knowledge inheritance. 3) It is encouraged to stimulate the willingness of young teachers to actively participate in intergenerational learning through teaching observation, intergenerational cooperative projects or teaching salons.

From the research result of the 4<sup>th</sup> objective, it was found that both online and offline intergenerational knowledge transfer have a significant positive impact on innovative work behaviors in the classroom and innovative work behaviors outside the classroom. Therefore, the related institute should apply as follows: 1) Higher vocational colleges should establish a normalized offline communication mechanism, such as "young teachers' teaching observation day" and "master-apprentice joint lesson preparation system", to promote face-to-face inheritance of teaching practice experience and stimulate teaching innovation behaviors inside and outside the classroom. 2) Encourage and support the use of digital platforms to carry out online knowledge sharing and experience transfer, break the limitations of time and space, and enhance the sustainability of teaching innovation. 3) It is recommended to integrate online and offline knowledge transfer mechanisms to promote a "hybrid intergenerational inheritance system" to enhance young teachers' innovation and professional growth both inside and outside the classroom.

## 2. The suggestions for future research

2.1 Expand the sample scope to include middle-aged and elderly teachers and secondary vocational teachers to improve the universality and systematization of the research.

2.2 Introduce mediating and moderating variables, such as organizational support and teaching commitment, to deepen the path mechanism analysis.

2.3 Use multiple data sources, combined with interviews, behavioral observations, etc., to improve the objectivity and reliability of the research.

2.4 Try mixed research methods and cross-level analysis to explore the interactive effects of individual and organizational factors on innovative work behavior.

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