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A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Mentor Teachers in the Internship Program at Farhangian University of Hormozgan Regarding the Impact of These Programs on Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to analyze the perceptions and lived experiences of mentor teachers regarding the impact of internship programs on the professional development of student teachers and themselves.

Methods: The study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design. The participants consisted of 16 mentor teachers supervising internship programs at Farhangian University of Hormozgan during the first semester of the 2025–2026 academic year. They were selected through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the research data. The data were analyzed using an interpretive analytical approach and thematic analysis.

Results: The findings derived from the analysis of the conducted interviews were presented under two overarching categories and nine overarching themes. The first category, advantages and strengths, included: (a) mentor teacher guidance, (b) student teacher guidance, (c) collaborative teaching and learning, and (d) constructive emotional interaction. The second category, challenges and weaknesses, included: (a) the theory–practice gap, (b) systemic gaps or infrastructural limitations, (c) deficiencies in the professional competence of mentor teachers, (d) the professional competence of student teachers, and (e) emotional resilience. In addition, 29 organizing themes were identified.

Conclusions: Finally, recommendations were proposed to improve and enhance the quality of the internship curriculum with the aim of promoting the professional development of student teachers and mentor teachers. Recommendations were also provided regarding the use of the findings to improve macro-level decision-making in the education system.

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Introduction

In the contemporary era, educational institutions are regarded as one of the most important pillars of societal development, as they nurture an aware and capable human workforce, enhance knowledge and skills, promote a culture of participation and responsibility, and provide the foundation for scientific innovation and direct contributions to economic, social, and cultural development (Tanjung, 2020). In Iran, as in many countries around the world, universities constitute one of the most important educational institutions. One of the primary missions of teacher education universities is to empower student teachers so that they can benefit from up-to-date knowledge and pedagogical perspectives, enhance the quality of teaching and learning, and develop their professional competencies. To this end, the university has incorporated practicum into its curriculum. Practicum is one of the most important components of the teacher education curriculum. It is an educational experience through which student teachers, in accordance with their intended professional goals, attempt to achieve greater success in their teaching practice (Ruhanen et al., 2013). This course serves as a bridge between theory and practice and enables student teachers to continuously integrate their learning with practical teaching experiences (Koomson & Arthur, 2023). Through the practicum program, student teachers gain greater knowledge of teaching, develop skills and attitudes, and become familiar with the values associated with effective professional performance (Jogan, 2019). Moreover, practicum is regarded as a form of experiential learning that provides students with valuable opportunities to develop their professional competencies throughout their education (O'Neill, 2010).

In fact, practicum is considered a key educational strategy and a model for reflective teaching[1] and deliberation[2]. It provides student teachers with opportunities to experience learning firsthand (Cheong et al., 2014). Consequently, many educational institutions around the world regard practicum as a fundamental pillar of employment-oriented policies, while some institutions require students to complete off-campus courses (Silva et al., 2018). Considering the conditions and implementation processes of practicum courses in different countries, various challenges have been identified. In Iran, the practicum curriculum is regarded as one of the most important components of teacher education (Maleki & Mehrmohammadi, 2018). Researchers and experts have also emphasized this objective. The primary goal of practicum courses in Farhangian University is to promote the development of reflective teachers. Since these courses have been

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designed based on a reflective approach, they are expected to be more effective (Ghanbari et al., 2018). Through participation in practicum, student teachers are provided with opportunities to connect their practical experiences with theoretical knowledge and professional skills (Maleki & Mehrmohammadi, 2018). The practicum program has been designed in such a way that it gradually develops professional competencies and provides student teachers with opportunities to become familiar with the actual school environment (Safarnavadeh et al., 2019).

Jensen et al. (2021) argue that practicum provides an appropriate context for assessing student teachers' ability to apply professional competencies in authentic classroom situations. Accordingly, since 2014, Farhangian University has emphasized this issue in accordance with the transformational document of the Fundamental Reform of Education (Operational Goal 11, Strategies 12 and 13, and Strategies 17–18), as well as through the incorporation of new scientific findings at the international level. The practicum curriculum has thus been formulated around a reflective teacher approach. This approach emphasizes the development of student teachers' competencies and professional skills and, consequently, enables them to become effective teachers who are capable of making informed decisions. In addition to teaching effectively in the classroom, student teachers are expected to demonstrate leadership and take responsibility for their teaching practices throughout their professional careers (Jafari-Shafagh et al., 2019).

This program is implemented through two teaching units per course (8 hours per week), totaling 128 hours per semester, and one unit in the fourth semester. It is offered to all students in the relevant academic fields. In the fifth semester, practicum focuses on systematic observation, situation analysis, problem identification, and reflective narration; in the sixth semester, students engage in teaching practice and the design of learning activities; in the seventh semester, practicum emphasizes independent lesson planning and teaching based on a constructivist approach; and in the eighth semester, students undertake group lesson planning and teaching under the supervision of the course instructor. In Practicum 1, student teachers become familiar with the school environment, regulations, facilities, target groups, and their professional responsibilities, while learning how to report their observations.In Internship 2, the student teacher, relying on their own knowledge and lived experiences, through reflective observation and narrating situations, and through interaction with the professor and mentor teacher, provides solutions for problems in the educational environment and implements them to a limited extent. In Internship 3, student teachers

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design, implement, and evaluate experimental and independent teaching and gradually develop their professional self-efficacy. In Internship 4, four student teachers collaboratively design independent teaching and classroom management activities, implement them in groups, and jointly evaluate their performance (Internship Curriculum, 2019). In the world of professional development schools (PDS), these schools are regarded as purposeful environments for the professional learning of student teachers. By providing opportunities for continuous interaction between the university and the school, PDSs facilitate guided experiences, practical engagement, and the gradual development of professional competencies among student teachers. They play an important role in enhancing the quality of internship programs. In these schools, mentor teachers serve as guides to professional learning patterns and facilitate learning, guidance, and continuous feedback to student teachers, playing a key role in transferring practical experiences, strengthening reflective thinking, and shaping professional identity. While this matter is usually carried out in ordinary schools, the objective of these schools is to establish a systematic and sustainable connection between theory and practice in teacher education, enhance student teachers' professional competencies, strengthen experience-based learning, and reduce the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice (Helms-Lorenz et al., 2018). Following the establishment of Farhangian University with teacher education campuses, student teachers are introduced to mentor teachers in schools where internship courses are implemented and, throughout the internship period, receive guidance from principals and mentor teachers.

The main objective of internship courses is to provide student teachers with opportunities to gradually encounter real teaching and educational situations, develop professional decision-making abilities, strengthen classroom management skills, and prepare them for their future professional responsibilities. Undoubtedly, whether in educational research or in the implementation of teacher-preparation programs, attention to the relationship between the teacher and the classroom is of particular importance. As classroom management can significantly influence teaching and learning, the necessity and importance of mentor teachers' guidance during internship courses is evident, with the development of student teachers' classroom-management skills representing one of its primary objectives. Furthermore, the limited research conducted on the experiences of mentor teachers regarding internship supervision has shown that, throughout the internship course, it is not possible to clearly determine what should be considered in terms of

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content and practice, what expectations should be established, and how the internship should be implemented. Nevertheless, a large proportion of teacher education programs are implemented through internship courses, and many mentor teachers believe that these courses are necessary for developing student teachers' competencies in teaching and classroom management (Adams et al., 2022). Experiential evidence indicates that the role of mentor teachers in influencing student teachers' learning, facilitating reflection on teaching and real classroom situations, transferring professional values, creating opportunities for observation, and analyzing educational and teaching practices is crucial (Vanthournout et al., 2012). Furthermore, the increasing number of studies demonstrating the positive benefits of internships has contributed to the emergence of the term "the internship era" in global teacher education (Hora et al., 2022). Accordingly, internship courses are important for developing student teachers' practical skills and providing opportunities to demonstrate their abilities and talents. In this regard, analyzing the impact of internships on professional development and responding to student teachers' needs is essential. Evidence suggests that internship courses provide the majority of student teachers with experience-based opportunities that contribute to successful performance in their future careers. The number of experiences gained during internships also demonstrates a positive relationship between participation in internships and students' academic achievement throughout their university education, particularly after graduation (Nunley et al., 2016). Recent studies have also demonstrated that the effects of internships during the academic year are associated with greater employability and social competence (Margaryan et al., 2022). In the following sections, we refer to some of these findings.

Azimi et al. (2019) analyzed the experiences of more than 41 student teachers over several internship periods and found that student teachers considered the analysis of the implementation process of teaching activities to be the most important outcome. Although there were some changes in their perceptions, they continued to regard themselves primarily as teachers. This finding demonstrates the significance of the internship course in professional development and growth in teaching practice.

Moradi et al. (2020) conducted a study examining the dimensions and components of the internship course at Farhangian University. Using qualitative interviews with faculty members and experts, they analyzed the dimensions and components of the internship course and showed that the course

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consists of various dimensions, including the professional competencies of the mentor teacher, mentor teacher guidance, student teacher, characteristics of the school environment, internship curriculum, evaluation system, and feedback. They also proposed a conceptual framework for the internship course. Hoseinzadeh et al. (2023) analyzed and designed a model for improving the quality of internship courses at Farhangian University and examined various dimensions of internship effectiveness using qualitative and quantitative methods.

Similarly, numerous previous studies on internship courses at Farhangian University have demonstrated that these courses face various challenges and weaknesses, including insufficient attention in the curriculum, managerial and structural obstacles, challenges in the theoretical approaches to internship, inappropriate relationships between mentor teachers and student teachers, lack of opportunities for discussion and critical examination of teaching methods, insufficient academic competence of mentor teachers to provide high-quality guidance, lack of appropriate supervision and assessment, challenges related to policy-making, deficiencies in the implementation and execution of educational programs, and inadequate communication between university supervisors and school-based mentor teachers (Almasi et al., 2017; Ghanbari et al., 2018; Ghadermarzi et al., 2017; Hejazi, 2018; Mortazavizadeh & Naser Isfahani, 2017; Gholampour et al., 2022).

In this regard, Muller et al. (2025), by examining the structure and outcomes of internship courses, demonstrate that the professionalization process of student teachers occurs through three main dimensions: knowledge, practice, and professional participation. This process significantly influences the outcomes of internship and highlights the importance of how mentor teachers interact with student teachers in the internship experience.

Cakar and Ozan (2025), in a study examining the experiences and perceptions of student teachers regarding their actual participation in internship courses, indicate that student teachers' initial encounters with educational activities in the classroom can pose a serious challenge to their expectations of what a teacher should be. This issue may affect their professional identity and demonstrates the importance of providing appropriate support and supervision during practical courses. Particularly when students move from the university environment to the school environment, they encounter serious differences.

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Trumble (2015), in a study, showed that some school administrators and mentor teachers lack sufficient motivation to collaborate with student teachers. They are reluctant to adopt new teaching methods and share their experiences with student teachers. Moreover, the inability to establish mutual trust between mentor teachers and student teachers has been identified as another major obstacle to improving the quality of internship courses.

Bukaliya (2012) argues that one of the important factors preventing appropriate communication between student teachers and mentor teachers, and even between student teachers and supervising instructors, is a sense of commitment that exists on the part of school staff, particularly administrators and mentor teachers.

Gault et al. (2010), in their study, stated that students who had successfully completed their internship courses encountered fewer problems in their classrooms and were more capable of performing their teaching responsibilities and demonstrated greater self-confidence.

Saap and Zhang (2009) reported that internship courses resulted in increased students' interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and capacity for communication.

Given the findings of these studies regarding the impact of internship courses on teacher education, it is evident that more than simply providing professional qualifications is required. Before beginning their work, teachers need serious guidance and support for professional development and the creation of appropriate learning opportunities (Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2021; Konig et al., 2020). In this context, university supervisors and mentor teachers can provide the necessary social and emotional support. Indeed, internship courses can create learning opportunities for professional development and emotional and social support, which are provided by mentor teachers and university supervisors. Such support is of particular importance (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Korthagen et al., 2006). Professors and mentor teachers can organize their support for student teachers through purposeful guidance of the internship process, providing analytical feedback based on field observation, facilitating the connection between theoretical foundations of education and real classroom situations, and creating opportunities for professional reflection on teaching experiences, in such a way that the gradual development of professional competence and teacher identity of student teachers is strengthened (Mena et al., 2017). In addition to professional support, mentor teachers can provide social support by establishing relationships based on trust, paying attention to the emotional needs of students, creating a safe environment for

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expressing concerns and educational problems, and strengthening their sense of belonging to the professional community. These factors can increase motivation and reduce anxiety resulting from initial experiences of teaching and help students adapt to the real educational environment (Lawson et al., 2015).

Overall, based on the findings of the studies reviewed, the quality of internship courses can be influenced by the nature of interaction among student teachers, mentor teachers, and school personnel, as well as by the actual opportunities available for experience, observation, and reflection. Regardless of the form and distance through which these processes occur, the consequences of such close and meaningful interactions play a fundamental role in shaping the professional identity of student teachers. One of the major aspects of effective internship courses is understanding how informal interactions between student teachers and mentor teachers influence the process of learning, professional identity formation, the development of educational perceptions, and the reconstruction of beliefs about teaching in real school contexts. Although empirical evidence is limited, it appears that the greater the students' involvement in internship courses, the greater the motivation required for collaboration and engagement with mentor teachers. Therefore, identifying different perspectives on internship courses can help reveal their various dimensions and enable a more comprehensive interaction between mentor teachers and students (Higdon, 2016).

At least three reasons can be identified for understanding and analyzing mentor teachers' perceptions of internship courses. First, understanding the type of educational interactions that students experience can affect the quality of their professional learning (Higdon, 2016). Second, mentor teachers' perceptions of the implementation and objectives of formal internship programs in real school settings can either strengthen or weaken the connection between the university curriculum and teaching practice (Carini et al., 2006). Third, because internship courses are part of a stage in the professional development of student teachers, gaining experience and receiving guidance from mentor teachers can provide students with valuable information for establishing positive and effective relationships (Jackson, 2016). As one of the main dimensions of professional development, student teachers' experiences in internship courses indicate the necessity of identifying and restructuring the appropriate implementation of internship programs so that the curriculum is revised and newly considered as an important matter. In this regard, the present study

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seeks to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the internship program and provide policymakers and decision-makers with a basis for making better decisions concerning the internship program at Farhangian University. On the other hand, understanding the principles and methods that mentor teachers employ in continuously improving internship courses can be helpful. Since there is room for improvement in the educational program and coordination of the practicum program through the use of an integrated approach, the main objective of the present study is to analyze and interpret the perceptions and experiences of mentor teachers regarding the presence of student teachers in internship courses. This will help extract and analyze the challenges, advantages, concepts, patterns, and implications of these experiences and contribute to the development of more effective internship courses.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. From the perspective of mentor teachers, what advantages and strengths does the internship program at Farhangian University have as a professional teaching experience?
2. From the perspective of mentor teachers, what challenges and weaknesses does the internship program at Farhangian University have as a professional teaching experience?

By presenting data and evidence concerning internship courses to administrators and the instructors responsible for implementing these courses, as well as policymakers, an attempt will be made to develop a more comprehensive understanding of internship courses. The ultimate goal of the present study is to identify and analyze the lived experiences of mentor teachers in internship courses and to use these experiences in shaping the process of guiding student teachers and mentor teachers.

Materials and Methods

The present study adopts an applied approach in terms of purpose and, in terms of the type of paradigm, follows a qualitative approach. The aim of the research is a phenomenological study to help understand and make sense of a mental phenomenon experienced by individuals (Morrissey & Higgs, 2006).

The population of participants consisted of mentor teachers, student teachers in their seventh semester, and mentor teacher trainers at Hormozgan Farhangian University in the first semester of the 2025-2026 academic year, in the field of elementary education. Individuals were selected using

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purposive sampling based on the criterion of willingness to participate in the research and prior supervisory experience of teaching practicum courses over at least the past three years, as well as supervisory experience across all four teaching practicum courses (Teaching Practicum 1, 2, 3, and 4). Fourteen individuals were interviewed. Data saturation was achieved by the fourteenth interview; however, two additional interviews were conducted solely to ensure theoretical saturation.

In order to collect the research data, semi-structured interviews were used. The interview process began with the main research question, "How do you evaluate the quality of teaching practicum course implementation?" and continued with follow-up questions such as "What challenges have you faced regarding practicum supervision?" and "Could you elaborate further on this?" Interviews were conducted after prior coordination in a mutually convenient environment, and each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. All interviews were fully recorded, transcribed, and coded in the order in which they took place with all study participants, based on the temporal sequence of the interviews conducted.

The data were analyzed using an interpretive approach and the thematic analysis method, which is a qualitative analytical method aimed at identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) present in the data, providing a deeper understanding of the meanings embedded in the experiences and perspectives of participants. In fact, in this method, the process of analyzing textual data is such that, through the extraction of prominent themes from the coded text, scattered data are transformed into organized, rich, and meaningful data at various levels (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method comprises six stages, which include: 1. Familiarization with the data (transcribing initial ideas—reviewing the initial written transcripts); 2. Generating initial codes (identifying the framework and coding pattern; coding smaller segments of text and prominent features); 3. Identifying themes (matching codes with themes; extracting themes; reviewing themes—reviewing the order of themes; selecting basic themes; selecting organizing themes; extracting overarching themes); 4. Reviewing and refining the thematic network (drawing the theme map and confirming themes); 5. Naming and refining the final themes; 6. Preparing and writing the final report (Terry et al., 2017).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, the criteria of validity and reliability proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985) for qualitative research were used. This method takes into account four

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criteria for each of the evaluation stages of the research findings: conformability, transferability, credibility, and dependability. To achieve each of these criteria, the following measures were taken:

1. Conformability: All stages of data collection and analysis were meticulously documented.

2. Transferability: The research findings were reviewed by four members of the faculty of educational sciences at Farhangian University of Hormozgan who had not participated in the research, and ultimately the corrective and revisory views and findings presented were confirmed by them. 3. Credibility: Given the sufficient time devoted to the research and the confirmation of the data collected by four subject-matter experts, the credibility of the research findings was ensured.4. Dependability: The data analysis process was carried out systematically and stage-by-stage, and all stages of coding, review, and theme extraction were precisely recorded and documented.

In line with ethical considerations, prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from participants, and they were assured that the information provided would be kept strictly confidential. Furthermore, all data were reported and analyzed without recording participants' names in the analysis file, so that the identity of individuals would remain unidentifiable. Participants were also assured that the information obtained would be used solely for the purposes of the research and would not be used for any other purpose.

Research Findings

In line with the main objective of the research and to achieve the intended purpose, the results obtained from the analysis of the interviews conducted are presented. In total, 181 basic themes, 29 organizing themes, and 9 overarching themes were identified, which, based on the research questions, fall under two general headings: 1- Advantages and Strengths, 2- Challenges and Weaknesses. Below, in response to the research questions, we will address each of the overarching themes, basic themes, and organizing themes that constitute them, and will also present sample excerpts from the relevant interviews as supporting evidence.

Question 1: What advantages and strong points does the teaching practicum courses at Farhangian University of Hormozgan have—as an educational and professional experience for mentor teachers and student teachers—in terms of professional development?

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In response to this research question, it must be noted that teaching practicum, as a phenomenon that connects theory and practice, has multiple advantages and strong points in the field of teacher professionalism for both groups—namely, mentor teachers and student teachers—regarding the practical application of theoretical learning in the real context of a classroom lesson. To this end, the themes related to the advantages and strong points extracted from the analyses of the interview texts will be discussed.

Table 1. Basic and Organizing Themes Constituting the Overarching Theme "Mentor Teacher's Guidance/Leadership"

Interviewee codes	Basic themes	Organizing Theme	Overarching Theme
A1,B2,C1,A2, D4,A1,A3,D2	- Feedback as a mirror -like, hope-inspiring reflection - Focus on strengths - Error-based teaching - Encouraging through constructive criticism - Non-judgmental attitude - focused on behavior rather than character - Creating an atmosphere of trust	Providing Corrective Feedback	Mentor Teacher's Guidance/Leadership
D1,D4,C4,A4, A2,A1	- Planned supervision - Observing student teachers' classroom order - Process-oriented supervision instead of outcome-oriented supervision - Developmental supervision - Informal supervision	Guiding and Monitoring Performance	
C1,A3,B1,B3, C2,B4,C4,B2	- Sharing experiences directly - Sharing failures - Transferring coping strategies - Narrating specific challenges and storytelling - Stating unwritten rules - Practical modeling - Enjoyment of a stable teaching career - Transferring professional discourse	Transferring Professional Experiences	

Undoubtedly, one of the most important factors in the professional success of student teachers is drawing on the experiences of mentor teachers. The effectiveness of this factor is clearly evident in the interviews. Regarding the provision of corrective feedback, interviewee A1 stated: "We mentor teachers have a sensitive responsibility. The way we provide feedback affects the student's future professional behavior; sometimes some of our behaviors discourage the student from continuing in this profession. For this reason, our feedback to the student must be encouraging.

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After all, mistakes are the foundation of success—if the student does not make mistakes, how will they learn the job? I try to give good feedback to student teachers, especially those who are novices." Regarding guidance and performance supervision, interviewee A2 stated: "I supervise the student teacher's work because the student teacher lacks practical work experience and is just beginning to learn; I must give them time. Of course, if we are indifferent, they will also regard the practicum as a mere formality and will not develop—they will not learn the work well. Our supervision makes the student work more carefully. Supervising the student's work is also one of our duties; if we do not supervise, then what use is the practicum?" Regarding the transfer of professional experience, interviewee B3 stated: "Storytelling is the best way to convey experience. I tell the student stories; I narrate the memories of my 22 years of teaching in the form of stories. I talk to them a lot because I want them to become a good teacher for our children."

Table 2. Basic and Organizing Themes of Student Teacher Guidance/Mentoring

Interviewee Code	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	Overarching Theme
A1,B1, C2,D2	The mentor's behavioral pattern for indirect and thoughtful guidance of the student teacher, familiarizing the mentor with new educational rules and regulations, facilitating "becoming a teacher"	Development of Professional Identity	Student Teacher Guidance/Mentoring
A2,A3,B2,D4, B4,	The mentor's moral commitment to professional guidance, being responsive, spending time and energy fulfilling job requirements, preserving their professional status and credibility, a sense of responsibility toward the student teacher's growth	Enhancement of Professional Responsibility	
B1,A3,A1,D3 D1,C3	Efforts to base teaching on new theories, attempts to connect theory and practice, improving the student teacher's problem-solving skills, the student teacher following the mentor's pattern in teaching, young teachers' ideas and reflective practice	Transfer of Educational Knowledge	

The role of the student teacher in constructing the mentor teacher's professional identity is an important yet neglected topic. As an educated human resource, the student teacher helps the mentor teacher redefine their professional identity; in fact, not only does the mentor teacher complete the student's professional identity, but the student's presence also facilitates the mentor teacher's professional development. An appropriate definition of the mentor teacher's identity can bring

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about fundamental changes in the mentor teachers' working style as well as in the academic and personal lives of student teachers. The most important themes mentioned by the research participants include the development of professional identity, the enhancement of professional responsibility, and the transfer of educational knowledge. Regarding the indirect guidance of the mentor teacher's thinking, interviewee B1 stated: "Perhaps I don't feel it directly, but the presence of another person in the classroom and the implementation of some new activities cause my behavior to change as well. When they teach part of the class, prepare and present a report, or offer a critique or suggestion, I, the teacher, learn something; my behavior changes, though sometimes I myself am not even aware of this change." Regarding preserving the teacher's professional dignity and credibility, interviewee D4 states: "Preserving the dignity of teaching is more important than anything else. I have about 24 years of experience, and in my view, a teacher who does not observe the dignity of this noble profession cannot play an effective role in society. This matters even more when dealing with practicum students who are just preparing to become teachers—if I do not observe the dignity of teaching, how will this student become a good teacher in the future? I never belittle my profession in front of the practicum student; I speak of its virtues and the blessings it has brought to my life. In fact, when I have a practicum student, I am compelled to be more careful in this regard." Regarding updating problem-solving skills, interviewee A1 stated: "The student deals with scientific issues; professors teach them scientific topics and theories. On the other hand, in today's world, the student can obtain a great deal of information with a simple click on the internet or by conversing with artificial intelligence. Some of them create interesting content or come up with interesting solutions to educational problems that we had never even thought of. When we see these methods and ideas, we too become updated, or we become motivated to study more solutions. I once had a student who offered an interesting solution to the problem of reading letters that share a common sound, which I used, and it was indeed effective."

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Table 3. Basic and Organizing Themes of Collaborative Teaching and Learning

Interviewee Code	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	Overarching Theme
C1,D1,C2, A1,A4,D2	Collaborative dialogue, co-constructing a shared lesson-planning model, sharing teaching methods, co-constructing coping strategies for instructional problems, collaborative practice activities, situational co-teaching	Collaborative Teaching Patterns	Collaborative Teaching and Learning
A1,B2,C2, C3,D4	Providing bidirectional feedback, encouraging student self-assessment, personalizing feedback for better influence, the right to critique the constructor, integrating and innovating assessment methods	Collaborative Assessment	
C3,D3, C4,C3 D2,B1	Observing collaboration, analyzing collaborative practices, co-learning, the teacher as co-learner, gradual transfer of responsibility	Collaborative Learning	
B3,B2 B1,C4,A3 ,A1	Reflecting on teaching methods, professional self-awareness, analyzing past decisions, formulating creative educational strategies, guidance based on reflection, fostering educational reflective thinking	Professional Reflection	

Collaborative teaching and learning is considered one of the main factors in the success of the practicum program. In the conducted interviews, issues related to collaboration and joint reflection were repeatedly mentioned, which in the final analysis were expressed in the form of four themes: professional teaching patterns, collaborative assessment, collaborative learning, and professional reflection. Regarding the sharing of teaching methods, interviewee C2 stated: "If students learn teaching methods well, then when they enter the teaching profession, their work becomes much easier, because when a teacher has a plan for their class and knows how to manage the classroom, they can keep their students under control. If a teacher does not know teaching methods, the class gets out of hand, and teaching becomes tiresome for them. They are uncertain about their own role and become confused. I try to use well-calculated teaching methods on the days when the practicum student comes to my class; sometimes I also tell the practicum students to prepare some of the new teaching methods they learned at university and come teach the class themselves. This boosts their self-confidence, and we also learn a few things ourselves, since we have been away from studying and university for a long time." Regarding the provision of two-way feedback and its importance, interviewee A1 stated: "There's no use giving feedback to the student if it's not immediate. In fact, if we ourselves don't give feedback on time, because we're so busy, we later

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forget to remind them. Immediately after any good work, my emphasis is on the good things, because negative feedback might reduce their motivation—they're still young, and if we reprimand them, they lose their morale. Of course, I do tell them about problems too, but in my own particular way. In any case, if we don't give feedback immediately—whether with a smile, in words, with a look, in writing, or in any other way—if we tell them right away, it stays in their minds. I'm also interested in knowing the student's opinion about my own class. Thank God, today's students have enough self-confidence to voice their opinions; sometimes they even say things quite bluntly, which can be a bit off-putting, but it's actually good. Some students, however, don't offer much opinion about our teaching, so I personally encourage them to share their views." Regarding collaborative analysis, interviewee D3 said: "Practicum students must gradually start teaching. My view is that whether in practicum one, two, three, or four, in each of them we should hand over part of the responsibility to them. Unless they take on responsibility, they won't progress. Sitting and watching is fine, but actually working is a different matter altogether. When they actually work, they truly understand the main problems—the later they start, the later they learn. Sometimes practicum students sit at a distance and watch, thinking, for example, 'why don't we do this' or 'why don't we do that,' assuming we're not carrying out our responsibilities properly. But once you hand them the work, they realize that classroom conditions required us to proceed with activities in that particular way. It is only when they take on responsibility that they become aware of the issues and problems involved. In my view, dividing responsibilities and assigning a series of executive tasks to practicum students is very helpful. Sometimes we sit together and analyze the lessons taught, and these analyses open up new mental perspectives for us." Regarding the analysis of past decisions, interviewee B1 said: "Some of our educational behaviors and actions have been mistaken; a number of decisions have simply drained our time and energy. If the practicum student is committed to the work and knowledgeable in the field, they and the mentor teacher can sit together and make new decisions about teaching. Having someone beside you at work, if you believe in them, gives you motivation—it helps change both of our attitudes and think more carefully."

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Table 4. Basic and Organizing Themes of Constructive Emotional Interaction

Interviewee Code	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	Overarching Theme
B1,C3,D1, A3,C2, B4,A3	Sense of renewal and renewed motivation among mentor teachers, experiencing the pleasure of the student's growth, taking pride in the professional identity of the mentor teacher role, the pleasure of facing new challenges, the pleasure of professional companionship, satisfaction from participating in cultural-building, satisfaction from social participation	Job Satisfaction	Constructive Emotional Interaction
C1,D1, A2,B3 ,B1,A1	Constructive relational living, mutual emotional satisfaction from progress in a trusting atmosphere, informal free expression, being accessible for progress, facilitating the practicum student's cultural integration and entry into the professional community	Constructive Human Relationships	
C3,C2,D4, B3,B4, A3,A4 ,B3	Alleviating the student's worries, mutual understanding, building a sense of empowerment and self-confidence, non-judgmental acceptance of the practicum student's feelings, stress management skills, appreciating the practicum student's effort, creating psychological safety, empathizing with the practicum student's initial anxieties	Emotional Support	

Attention to emotional interactions is an inevitable necessity for creating and sustaining motivation in any organization. Based on the analyses conducted from the interviews, three themes were extracted: job satisfaction, constructive human relationships, and emotional support, which indicate the importance of this dimension for both the practicum student and the mentor teacher. Regarding job satisfaction, interviewee B1 stated: "Talking about the teaching profession, especially with a student who is eager to learn, is enjoyable. Many times, we sit in the school's staff office and talk about discouraging livelihood and economic issues, which I don't like; but the student teacher has not yet entered these spaces—they are motivated to talk about education and related matters. This companionship with the student increases the pleasure of my work; I feel I'm doing something useful, and I feel less hopeless." Interviewee A2 also spoke about constructive human relationships as follows: "I feel that if the student asks questions freely, deeper learning occurs. But I must say that at the beginning of the practicum, many students don't dare to ask questions. It's as if they're afraid their questions might seem 'inappropriate' or 'naive.' I try to break this atmosphere. For example, sometimes I myself ask them: 'Why do you think this child behaved this way today?' or 'If you were in my place, how would you teach this part differently?' These

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questions let them know that there is room for inquiry. Once, a student was asking about how I dealt with a restless student. At first, they were quite hesitant. But when they saw that I was not only not upset but explained enthusiastically why I chose that approach, from then on they had lots of questions every session. Many of these questions were also fresh for me and made me look at some of my usual methods from a different perspective. Nevertheless, some mentor teachers sometimes think that the student should only be an observer and not ask questions. I don't like this approach, because the practicum is an opportunity for learning, not rigid supervision." Regarding emotional support, interviewee C3 stated: "Last year, a student named 'Amin' was working with me. On his first day at school, I noticed he was really stressed. What I did was that I didn't let us go straight to the classroom. I took him to the teachers' office, gave him some tea, and started making small talk. Then I said: 'Amin dear, actually, I remember my own first day of practicum too. My mentor came and sat in the classroom. I remember I could barely breathe.' Amin looked at me with surprise. He couldn't believe I had had such an experience too. Amin calmed down a bit."

Question 2: From the perspective of mentor teachers, what challenges and executive weaknesses does the practicum program at Farhangian University have as an educational and professional experience?

Based on this research question, it should be noted that every educational phenomenon and every codified plan and program, despite the advantages and strengths it possesses, may have challenges and weaknesses in the domain of implementation; the practicum program and its guidance by mentor teachers are no exception to this rule. In what follows, the themes extracted from the analyses conducted on the interview texts, related to the challenges and weaknesses of the practicum from the mentor teachers' perspective, are examined.

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Table 5. Basic and Organizing Themes of the Theory-Practice Gap Dimensions

Interviewee Code	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	Overarching Theme
B2,C1,D3 B4,C4 A2,A3.D1	Absence of an intermediate model, the distance between the university's ideal model and the reality of the school, the gap between mentor teachers' expectations and reality, the mentor teacher's lack of belief in theoretical knowledge, the university-school dialogue gap, the student teacher's passivity when confronted with the contradiction between theory and practice, the generality and abstractness of educational frameworks, the abstractness of the university curriculum content	Gap Between Theoretical and Practical Knowledge	Theory-Practice Gap
B3,A3.D1	Inability to perceive meaningful change in the classroom, feeling powerless against administrative structures, in-service training being ineffective	Gap Between Personal Beliefs and Instructions/Regulations	
C2,D2, A2,B4, A1	Ambiguity of the student teacher's role, lack of critical reflection in the student teacher, the student teacher's negligence toward their own academic mental assumptions, a sense of professional loneliness in student teachers, the practicum design model not being up to date	Distance Between the Mental Model of the Student Teacher and Reality	
A4,A2,D4, B3,B1,	The formation of learning based on individual experience rather than theoretical knowledge, the formalization and ceremonial nature of the practicum process, the dominance of a bureaucratic view on the educational approach, inability to translate theory into practical strategy, quantitative and grade-oriented assessments	Limitations in Practical Understanding	

The disconnect between theory and practice is one of the notable issues in the internship program. The gap between what the student-teacher has learned and what is applicable in the real world can cause confusion among student-teachers. Examining the dimensions affecting this phenomenon helps student-teachers adapt more quickly to real conditions. For this reason, addressing this dimension in the internship process becomes highly important. A correct understanding of real conditions and adapting it to educational theories can affect the efficiency and performance of the

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internship program. In the conducted interviews, the themes of the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge, the distance between personal beliefs and instructions, the gap between mental models and reality, and the limitation of practical understanding were identified as dimensions of the theory-practice disconnect in the internship process.

Regarding the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge, interviewee code B4 stated: "At university, the respected professors emphasize learning theories, the philosophy of education, and a lot of textbook concepts. Students come to school with a completely idealistic mindset full of excellent mental plans. But in my classroom, I face thirty-three mischievous and energetic boys, some of whom can't even wait for recess, let alone carry out an educational scenario designed at university. I remember the first session when one of the students came. He had done a lot of research, had meticulously written his lesson plan, and explained the concepts of 'meaningful learning' and 'student activeness' beautifully. I said, 'Alright, go ahead and implement it.' But looking through the classroom window, I saw that the children seemed to be on another planet. The student wanted to teach using a discovery-based method, but a child who came to school without breakfast, or another who had fought with his friend over a chair, had neither the patience for discovery nor the concentration."

Regarding the distance between personal beliefs and instructions, interviewee code A3 stated: "Last year, I had a good student. He presented a creative plan for teaching science using a laboratory method. But its implementation required simple equipment such as test tubes and beakers. When I told the school principal, the principal replied: 'The laboratory equipment hasn't been used for years; if it breaks or a student gets hurt, who is responsible? The intern student? Some things can't be done at school—you'd need permission from a hundred people.'"

Regarding the gap between mental models and reality, interviewee code C2 said: "One of the students named 'Hamid' came to our school. On the first day, I said, 'Welcome, from today you are my classroom assistant teacher.' Hamid came with a lot of motivation, but after two days, I saw him standing in the schoolyard playing ball with the children during recess. The children called him 'Mr. Hamid' and were happy. But after a week, Hamid came to me and said: 'Sir, I really don't know what my role is here. I came to teach, but the students see me as an older student, not a teacher. One day the principal asked me to help in the prayer room, another day the vice principal told me to deliver some papers. I'm confused.'"

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Regarding the limitation of practical understanding, interviewee code A2 said: "In our school, there was a common practice we called 'instant internship.' That is, the student would come, take some photos of himself and the children, give me his lesson plan to sign, do a ten-minute teaching session, and leave. Some students didn't even learn the children's names. As a mentor teacher, I saw that this process had no impact on their professional growth. They obtain the internship certificate, but they don't take away any real experience from within the classroom.

I spoke with the school principal several times: 'Sir, this process is becoming merely formal. We need to work in a way that the student actually becomes part of the class, not just a visitor.' But the principal said: 'They're satisfied themselves, the university is satisfied, and we haven't let the class be disrupted.'"

Table 6. Basic Themes and Organizing Themes of the Systematic Disconnect (Infrastructure Limitation)

Interviewee Code	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	Overarching Theme
A4,C4,B3,B2, D3,D4,D1,B1	Weak communication system, inflexible bureaucracy, congested educational lesson plans, time conflicts, lack of operational independence, excessive red tape, low continuity in internship programs, frequent changes in instructions	Structural Barriers	Systematic Disconnect (Infrastructure Limitation)
B1,A2,C3 C2,D1,D3	Arbitrary decisions, inconsistency in roles among stakeholders, role overlap, ambiguity in job descriptions, contradictory expectations, weakness in the standard evaluation system	Ambiguity of Executive Roles	
C4,D4,C2,A4, B1,B4,C2	Shortage of educational space, limited access to technology, high classroom density, lack of educational aid equipment, deterioration of educational tools, weakness of physical infrastructure, time constraints	Environmental Barriers (Resource and Facility Shortage)	
B1,A3,A2, B1,D2,A2	Pressure to implement standards without support, top-down policies, economic hardship, lack of institutional support for mentor teachers, cultural poverty, prioritization of documentation	Institutional and Social Pressures	
D3, B3, C1,B4, C3,A2	Hierarchical outlook and top-down directives, resistance of mentors to innovation, culture of quantitative evaluation, insistence on traditional documentation methods, culture of individualism, lack of a culture of documentation	Traditional Organizational Culture	

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Physical and technological infrastructures not only provide the platform for implementing curricula, but also directly affect academic motivation, learning quality, and even the psychological well-being of students. As evident in the interview analysis, organizing themes such as structural barriers, ambiguity of executive roles, environmental barriers, institutional and social pressures, and traditional organizational culture indicate the limitation of certain infrastructures in schools, which reduces the efficiency of internship programs and leads to the burnout of student-teachers.

In this regard, interviewee code B3 stated about structural barriers: "In my opinion, dense educational and training plans are one of the biggest afflictions of our educational system. It's as if someone sitting above us thinks that the more plans there are, the higher the quality of education becomes—unaware that this high volume of plans actually has the opposite effect. This heavy workload leads to superficiality. Teachers and students no longer have the opportunity to go into depth. Each plan is thrown together in a way that it just gets recorded and fills up the record, and as a result, the children don't properly learn any of those plans. As a mentor teacher, when I see that I'm forced to implement all these plans, I no longer have any motivation for creativity and innovation. I just become an executor who carries out orders. The intern student develops the same feeling."

Interviewee code B1, regarding the ambiguity of executive roles, said: "Arbitrary opinions are one of the problems of our school, especially in the field of internships. When decision-making about the quality of a training course or the evaluation of a student becomes tied to one person's personal taste, everything becomes unstable. What the intern should do and in what area they should help in the school is also a matter of personal opinion—the principal has one opinion, the educational vice principal has another opinion, the executive vice principal wants the intern to help him, and this disrupts the order of the work."

Interviewee C4 said about environmental barriers: "More than thirty students are gathered in a forty-square-meter room. The teacher has to spend most of their time controlling disorder. Crowded and cramped classrooms cause more fatigue for the teacher and restlessness for the students. As long as the physical infrastructure problems of schools are not resolved, any educational plan will also be incomplete."

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Institutional and social pressures were among the issues mentioned by interviewees. For example, interviewee code A2 said about this: "One of the bitter and influential realities is the economic poverty of families. Our school is in a neighborhood where most families don't have good economic conditions. Students whose fathers work day-labor jobs or are unemployed, some unfortunately have addiction issues or are children of divorce, don't have proper bags or shoes, don't eat a good breakfast, can't afford field trip costs—how can a plan or idea be implemented? Every plan and idea need money."

Another issue raised in the interviews as an obstacle to internship work was traditional organizational culture. Interviewee code C3 said about this: "In our elementary school, every teacher locks themselves in their own classroom and thinks their responsibility ends at the walls of their classroom. No one has the patience to create trouble for themselves. They don't welcome group plans and activities much because they would have to take on a part of the work, be obligated to spend time, and stay longer at school—that's why they don't welcome it, and this has become part of the school's culture. This mindset drains the dynamism out of the school."

Table 7. Basic Themes and Organizing Themes of Professional Competency of the Mentor Teacher

Interviewee Code	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	Overarching Theme
B3, C3, D2,C4,B1, D4	Lack of training and formal empowerment to fulfill the mentor role, need to learn new teaching methods, need to learn new assessment methods, need to learn educational technology, need to learn stress management methods, need to learn management methods	Need for Continuous Retraining	Professional Competency of the Mentor Teacher
C1,D3, ,A3 B2,A2,A1	Conflict between conventional beliefs and educational standards, differences in perspective on the teacher's role, conflict between traditional order and freedom of student action, differences in prioritization of educational goals, instrumental and result-oriented outlook toward the student, deliberate or unintentional negligence	Value and Attitudinal Conflict	

Despite their valuable experience, mentor teachers need to update their knowledge and attitudes. Today's students differ fundamentally from previous generations; digital tools, artificial intelligence, online learning platforms, and new ways of managing and expressing emotions have changed their lifestyle. Teachers who are unfamiliar with these tools or methods deprive students

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of learning opportunities. Therefore, addressing the professional competency and qualification of mentor teachers is essential.

Interviewee code B1 said about the need for continuous retraining: "I have to both train the student-teachers, supervise their performance in the classroom, and communicate with students and parents. These simultaneous responsibilities can be highly stressful. On one hand, Farhangian University expects the quality of education to be maintained; on the other hand, the school has its own priorities, and student-teachers sometimes face personal and educational challenges. Forming discussion groups with other mentor teachers to share experiences and solutions would be very helpful for us. If in-service certificates could be issued in some way, it would be very effective and practical."

Interviewee code C3 also stated in this regard: "Do they think that because we've been teachers for several years, we no longer need to learn? That's completely wrong! Is it possible to be a mentor without staying updated with the new needs of today's children and the new generation of interns? Or maybe they don't have the budget and plan? But at any cost, it must exist. Without training, one is tempted to revert to their own old methods—that is, to tell the intern, 'Sit and watch, whatever I do, you do the same.' This means killing that student's creativity and critical thinking. I want to make them into a reflective teacher, not a second-hand copy of myself.

We mentor teachers are, in a way, the front line of teacher education. When there's no training course, we're left with unanswered questions. For example, how should we deal with an intern so that their self-confidence increases without making them think they know everything? Who is supposed to teach us this?"

Interviewee code A2 said regarding value and attitudinal conflict: "Experienced mentor teachers, due to years of working in the traditional educational system, sometimes develop a rigid educational outlook. They see the student as a means to achieve goals such as high grades, passing exams, and good statistics. They emphasize strict discipline and memorization of material. But student-teachers have a different view of students; they haven't yet fallen into the stereotypical views held by some teachers, and this issue creates problems in the relationship between the mentor teacher and the student. The mentor teacher expects the student to be orderly and obedient, but the student-teacher seeks 'participation and creativity.'"

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Table 8. Basic Themes and Organizing Themes of the Professional Competency of the Student-Teacher

Interviewee Code	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	Overarching Theme
C1,C3, C2 ,C1,B2 ,C3	Inability to manage complex situations, weakness in implementing time management, weakness in implementing modern teaching methods, weakness in prioritizing university tasks and assignments, inability to implement technology-based educational ideas, weakness in documenting performance	Skill and Competency Gap	Professional Competency of the Student-Teacher
D2,C1,D3, D4,A4,C4,C3 B2	Meaninglessness in goal-setting, lack of belief in the effectiveness of the internship, professional exhaustion caused by repetition, low reward and feedback, lack of sense of agency, absence of an inspiring role model, lack of operational independence, learned helplessness	Lack of Motivation	
C1,D1,C4 D1,A1,B2	Learned helplessness, belief in one's own inability, negative perfectionism, negative internal self-talk, dependency on others' approval, comparison with failure	Low Self-Efficacy	

Student-teachers must possess sufficient depth of knowledge and skill competency in the field they are going to teach. Lack of expertise harms students' learning and academic development. Beyond subject-matter expertise, student-teachers must also have adequate motivation and self-confidence. Based on the analyses conducted on the interview texts in this regard, three organizing themes emerged: skill and competency gap, lack of motivation, and low self-efficacy.

In this regard, interviewee code C3 stated about the skill and competency gap: "Some student-teachers often underestimate the time needed to explain a topic, conduct a group activity, or even do question and answer sessions. Sometimes students become so absorbed in explaining a peripheral point that they neglect the main lesson time. Many write lesson plans, but when a student asks a question or a discussion arises, they don't know how to adapt the plan."

Interviewee code A4 stated about the lack of motivation: "The school is a closed system with a defined hierarchy. The teacher, the principal, the educational supervisor, and even parents each have specific roles. A newly arrived student-teacher usually isn't given much visibility. It's quite natural that in the first weeks, they're more of an observer than an active participant. For this reason, many student-teachers feel they don't have any important work or aren't doing anything special, and this causes their motivation to decrease. Many student-teachers, due to constant

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evaluation, don't have the courage to do independent work. When you constantly feel that every move you make is under a microscope, you prefer to just be an observer. Some mentor teachers, due to fear of disrupting the class, also don't entrust the really important parts of the work to the student. As a result, the student only does peripheral tasks like grading papers or supervising the children, and loses the sense of being useful."

Interviewee code C4 said about low self-efficacy: "There's a false belief among some students that 'my first teaching session must be the best and most flawless.' Whereas in reality, the classroom is a place for experimentation. I always tell them: there's no such thing as a perfect first teaching session, there's only a first teaching session. Or maybe I should put it this way: there's never such a thing as the most perfect teaching, and there's always room for improvement—but it takes a long time for the student to understand this.

For example, some good students work hard to design an excellent 10-minute segment, but when, during implementation, two children talk at the back of the class, they see the whole plan as ruined. The classroom must move forward with these very problems and flaws, but an inexperienced student quickly loses confidence and loses their motivation."

Table 9. Basic Themes and Organizing Themes of Emotional Resilience

Interviewee Code	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	Overarching Theme
C1,C3,C2 D1,D4,B3	Feeling of pressure to achieve desired outcomes, fear of erosion/wearing down, feelings of emotional helplessness when facing persistent weaknesses, fear of educational failure, conflict between kindness and firmness, fear of new challenges	Excitement-related tensions of the student teacher	Emotional Resilience
D2,C1,D3, D4,A4,C4,C3 B2	Emotional exhaustion from the burden of tasks, practicing life management/authority, worn/tired routine, fear of not attending to personal matters, fear of being judged by clients, feeling of professional refuge-lessness/vulnerability, new generation of students, anxiety over doubled responsibilities	Emotional tension of the mentor teacher	

In the classroom environment, the emotional resilience of the mentor teacher and student teacher functions as a "psychological shield" against unforeseen tensions and daily challenges. This psychological construct—derived from emotional regulation ability, cognitive flexibility, and mutual social support—allows the mentor teacher to demonstrate stable behavioral patterns during critical moments (such as classroom disorder or negative feedback) and prevents the transmission

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of their own anxiety to the student teacher. Meanwhile, relying on this same pattern, the student teacher learns to digest their educational failures—rather than catastrophizing them—as a natural part of the learning process, using them for professional growth. In other words, the absence of this resilience transforms the mentor-student relationship into a cycle of blame and passivity, whereas its presence provides a safe environment for experimentation, error, and deep educational learning (Jennings et al., 2009).

Based on the interview content, two organizing themes were extracted: emotional tensions of the student teacher and emotional tensions of the mentor teacher.

Regarding the theme of student teacher emotional tensions, interviewee D4stated: "Student teachers confuse kindness with weakness, and firmness with harshness. In their minds, these two poles become two ends of a spectrum, as if they must choose one and completely abandon the other. Many students think that if they are firm and set boundaries, the children will hate them or label them as a 'strict, rigid teacher.' As a result, they try their utmost to be 'likable,' even at the cost of losing classroom order. When a student hasn't clarified for themselves in advance 'where are my boundaries?' and 'under what circumstances should I be firm?', they become confused in the moment and display contradictory reactions. For example, one day they react so harshly to a minor infraction that the children are startled, while another day they simply overlook a significant act of disrespect."

Regarding the theme of mentor teacher emotional tensions, interviewee C1 stated:

"From my perspective, the mentor teacher is like the central pole of a tent. If this pole becomes exhausted and cracked, the entire tent collapses. Imagine a mentor teacher who has been teaching for 15 years in a crowded urban school. Every day, they grapple with administrative problems, parental pressure, and the boundless energy of students. Now a student teacher has been added to their responsibilities. This teacher no longer has the capacity to patiently listen to the concerns of a novice. They might be physically present in the classroom, but completely absent mentally. An exhausted teacher has a very low threshold of tolerance. The slightest disruption by the student teacher in class, or even a simple question from them, can trigger intense anger in the mentor teacher. They can no longer play the role of the tent's central pole."

Finally, based on the research findings, a conceptual map of the overarching and organizing themes of the study was drawn, which can be seen in the diagram below (Diagram 1).

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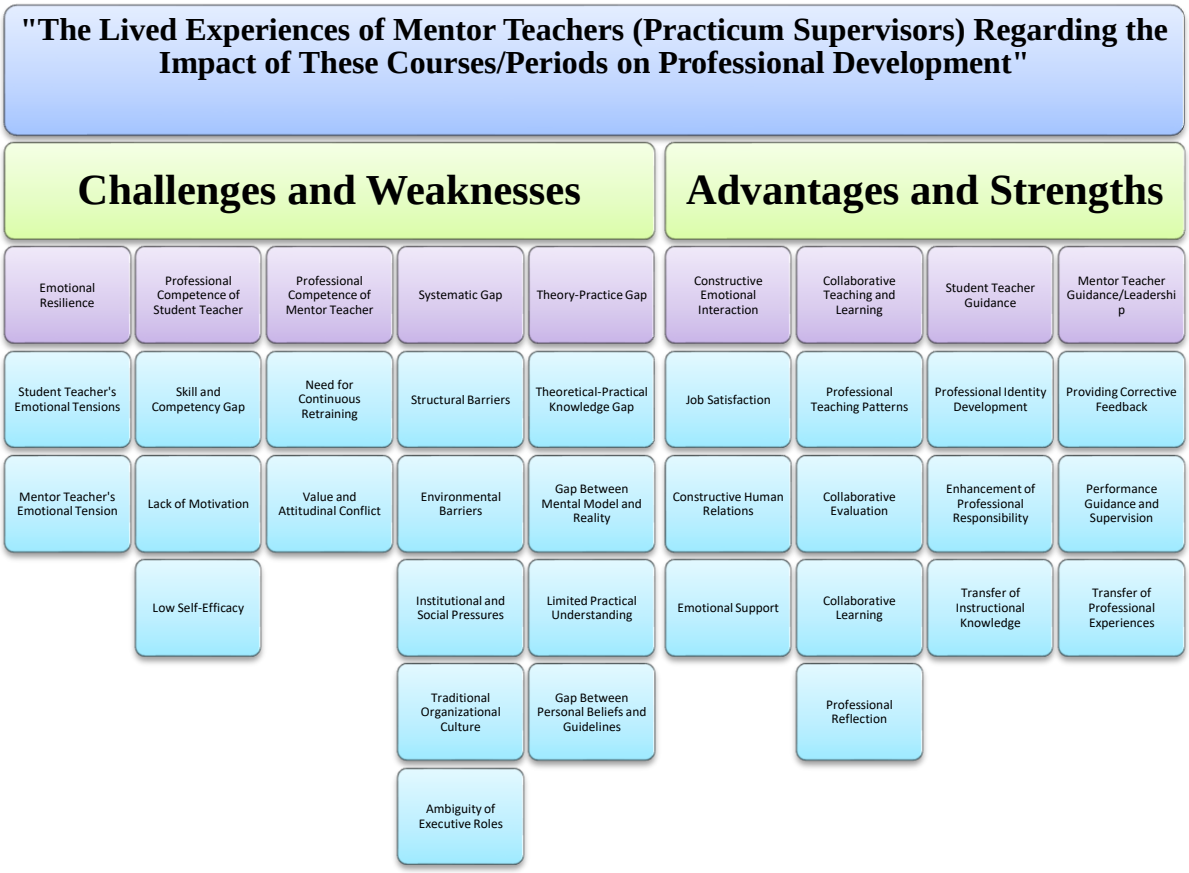


Figure 1. Conceptual Map of Research Findings

Discussion

Farhangian University is the most important institution responsible for supplying, training, and developing human capital for the country's education system. Among the curricular programs of this university, the practicum (internship) is regarded as the distinguishing chapter that sets it apart from other institutions and universities involved in education. This program, which is implemented to strengthen student teachers' practical and theoretical skills in real educational environments, is considered a key tool in training reflective and effective teachers in Iran. Since this curriculum requires continuous examination for ongoing improvement and prioritization in order to respond to the educational needs of student teachers, the present study has examined the advantages, strengths, challenges, and weaknesses of practicum courses in relation to the professional development of student teachers and mentor teachers, based on the lived experiences of mentor

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teachers regarding the presence of student teachers during these courses. The results were summarized according to the research questions.

Regarding the first research question concerning the advantages and strengths of practicum courses for the professional development of student teachers and mentor teachers, four themes were extracted: mentor teacher guidance, student teacher guidance, collaborative teaching and learning, and constructive emotional interaction. Mentor teacher guidance includes providing corrective feedback, guiding and supervising performance, and transferring professional experiences. These factors demonstrate the mentor teacher's professional ability to foster the professional development of trainees, which leads to the empowerment of student teachers and helps them succeed not only in the practicum environment but also in their future careers. In this regard, the role of mentor teachers is essential due to their direct impact on the learning, empowerment, and professional growth of student teachers. In this context, basic themes such as **planned supervision, sharing direct/firsthand experiences, storytelling and narration, growth-oriented supervision, and informal supervision** were extracted, which further highlight the key role of mentor teachers in the practicum curriculum. These findings are consistent with the studies of Bastin & Dark (2023), Cochran-Smith (2003), and Korthagen et al. (2006), which also emphasized the significant role and support of mentor teachers in the practicum.

Student teacher guidance encompasses the organizing themes of professional identity development, enhancement of professional responsibility, and transfer of instructional knowledge, which were extracted based on basic themes such as: the teacher becoming facilitated, the mentor teacher's moral commitment to professional guidance, efforts to link theory and practice, updating problem-solving skills, preserving the teacher's professional dignity and credibility, the student teacher and fresh ideas, and efforts toward operationalizing teaching based on new theories. This dimension illustrates the distinct role of the student teacher in the professional development of the mentor teacher; the impactful dimension of the student teacher on the growth and enhancement of the mentor teacher's character is often overlooked, since all attention tends to focus on the training of the student teacher by the mentor. However, according to the conducted interviews, it became clear that the presence of student teachers in the classroom also stimulates the mentor teacher's activity and learning. In this regard, Thurl et al. (2024) have emphasized the importance of the

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practicum in the professional development and updating of teachers responsible for guiding student teachers.

Collaborative teaching and learning include themes such as professional teaching patterns, collaborative evaluation, collaborative learning, and professional reflection. These themes were derived from basic themes such as reflective dialogues, collaborative analysis, professional self-awareness, learning organization, reflection-based mentoring, educational far-sightedness, and decision analysis. Therefore, mutual instructional strategies during the student teachers' practicum play a key role in the professional development of both student teachers and mentor teachers. By using these instructional strategies, student teachers can become better prepared to fulfill their teaching responsibilities. This can strengthen skills such as lesson design and collaborative learning by providing unique opportunities to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical experience. In this regard, Donche et al. (2015) have noted that one of the goals of the practicum in teacher education should be to help student teachers develop their own learning and research methods—and, indeed, in this process, the development of mentor teachers also occurs. The foundation of learning is teaching; when the mentor teacher is teaching the student teacher, they themselves first enter the process of learning and development. Sapp & Zhang (2009) have also pointed to the notable increase in interpersonal and communication skills of both student teachers and mentor teachers during the practicum period.

Constructive emotional interaction comprises three themes: job satisfaction, constructive human relations, and emotional support, which are related to basic themes such as: relational living, mutual understanding, the experience of joy from the student's growth, pride in professional identity in the mentor's role, enjoyment in facing new challenges, satisfaction from participation in organizational culture, and enjoyment of professional companionship. The theme of constructive emotional interaction plays an essential role in the effectiveness of the practicum, since the primary driver of effort, learning, and progress during this period is the understanding of emotions and the regulation of behavior based on them. Constructive emotional interaction increases the motivation of both the student teacher and the mentor teacher to develop their work and profession. This motivation, arising from mutual understanding, leads student teachers and mentor teachers to engage with greater interest and commitment in educational and practical activities and to make use of available opportunities to improve their professional skills. The

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emotional interaction between the student teacher and the mentor teacher can lay the groundwork for a professional and growth-oriented relationship in which trust, empathy, and constructive feedback flow freely—ultimately leading to improved educational quality for students and greater job satisfaction for both parties. In such a relationship, the mentor teacher emerges not merely as a supervisor but as an experienced companion and supporter on the student teacher's path toward becoming a professional; this interaction can provide an opportunity for indirect learning through observation, shared reflection, and the exchange of lived experiences. When this relationship is built on mutual trust and respect, the student teacher experiences psychological safety and, without fear of judgment, accepts their mistakes as part of the learning process. On the other hand, the mentor teacher, by observing the student's gradual growth, experiences a sense of satisfaction and positive impact, which in turn reproduces motivation and professional commitment in both parties. Ultimately, this dynamic cycle of emotional interaction serves as the fundamental infrastructure for the formation of an authentic, committed, and capable teaching identity. In this regard, Safarnavadeh et al. (2019) have pointed to the effectiveness of the practicum program in shaping the teaching identity of student teachers and strengthening the identity and satisfaction of mentor teachers through empathy and mutual understanding. Likewise, Nunley et al. (2016) and Salticoff (2017) have noted the positive relationship between the mentor teacher's emotional understanding of the trainee and favorable outcomes following graduation.

Regarding the second research question concerning the challenges and weaknesses of practicum courses in the professional development of student teachers and mentor teachers, five general themes were extracted: theory-practice gap, infrastructure limitations, mentor teacher's professional competence, student teacher's professional competence, and emotional resilience. ** The theory-practice gap is one of the fundamental challenges in student teachers' practicum courses that can significantly affect the effectiveness of this period. The gap between theory and practice in the practicum is considered one of the foundational challenges on the path to becoming a professional. On one hand, in the academic environment, the student is confronted with idealistic concepts, abstract models, and rigid, inflexible theoretical rules that are often removed from the complexities and contradictions of the real world. On the other hand, in the practicum environment, they face fluid situations, rapid decision-making, and human and organizational pressures in which mere adherence to theoretical instructions is not only impossible but sometimes inefficient and

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even destructive. If not properly managed, this gap can lead to professional disillusionment, a sense of incompetence, and the formation of a skeptical attitude toward academic knowledge. However, if the practicum is designed as a bridge for "testing theories in the context of reality" rather than merely "carrying out instructions," this very tension can become the driving engine of deep learning, creativity, and the formation of "practical knowledge." This important point, mentioned in most of the conducted interviews, was formed from four themes: the theoretical-practical knowledge gap, the distance between mental models and reality, limited practical understanding, and the gap between personal beliefs and guidelines. These themes were also extracted from basic themes such as: ambiguity of the student's role, perceived inability to create meaningful change in the classroom, lack of systematic reflection, the practicum process becoming formal and ceremonial, the dominance of a bureaucratic perspective over an educational approach, ineffective in-service training, inability to translate theory into practical strategy, the discourse gap between university and school, and quantitative, grade-oriented evaluations. Safarnavadeh et al. (2019), in their study, note that the mismatch between educational standards taught at the university and the requirements of the actual classroom is an obstacle to the trainee's ability to implement their educational aspirations and goals. Trumble (2015), in a study, found that the lack of proper connection between educational regulations and schools' operational capacities reduces student teachers' motivation to continue on the educational path. In this regard, it should be noted that, given the key role of student teachers' accurate perception of educational deficiencies in professional resilience for overcoming obstacles and continuing professional work, this challenge and shortcoming can largely be resolved by enhancing this perception through mentor teachers. However, if this dimension of student teachers' understanding is not addressed, in some cases the effectiveness of the practicum program is reduced to a minimum. It is therefore very important for mentor teachers at schools to fulfill their responsibility in properly explaining this mismatch, and by creating a hopeful intellectual framework, to help student teachers understand that this mismatch is relative and varies from school to school and region to region—and that through the efforts of the school principal, teachers, and the participation of parents, the effects of this mismatch can largely be reduced. In this way, student teachers can be prepared for a good and hopeful start toward their professional development, and the necessary motivation can be created in them to continue on this path (De Jonge et al., 2013).

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Educational infrastructure in schools is considered one of the key pillars in the teaching and learning process. Infrastructure includes educational spaces, equipment, access to technology, and human resources, all of which have a significant impact on the quality of education. Having classrooms with adequate space, providing suitable educational equipment, and utilizing modern technologies enable teachers and students to achieve more effective instruction and acquire the necessary skills for the modern world. Moreover, favorable infrastructure can increase students' motivation and self-confidence and lay the groundwork for active learning.

However, schools face numerous infrastructural challenges. Shortages of educational spaces, lack of access to modern equipment, and the deterioration of some school buildings are among these limitations. In many areas, especially in deprived regions, classrooms are overcrowded, and teachers face shortages of resources and facilities. These conditions lead to a decline in the quality of education and inequality in access to opportunities. Therefore, in the analyzed interview texts, there were many references to these limitations, including the organizing themes extracted regarding infrastructure limitations: structural barriers, shortage of resources and facilities, institutional pressures, traditional organizational culture, and ambiguity of executive roles—formed from basic themes such as: weak communication systems, lack of educational space, the mentor teacher's hierarchical and directive outlook, arbitrary decisions, excessive reliance on circulars/directives, limited access to technology, centralized policies, resistance to innovation, high class density, a culture of quantitative evaluation, time conflicts, lack of operational independence, cultural poverty, and contradictory expectations. These issues can lead to reduced performance among student teachers, a decline in the quality of practical experience, and the loss of effective learning opportunities. This issue also affects the motivation and enthusiasm of mentor teachers; lack of access to standard infrastructure reduces the utilization of mentor teachers' capacities and abilities. Studies by Hejazi (2018) and Ghanbari et al. (2017) have pointed to cases such as the impact of shortages in space and educational facilities on teacher performance, which aligns with the results obtained in this study.

The professional competence of the mentor teacher is composed of two themes: the need for continuous retraining and value conflict. An attitude has been formed from these themes. These themes are based on foundational themes such as conflict of conventional beliefs, differences in perspective regarding the teacher's role, the need to learn evaluation methods, differences in

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prioritizing educational goals, and the need to learn organizational management methods. Insufficient attention to these issues is one of the weaknesses afflicting schools, which can reduce the efficiency and effectiveness of the teaching profession as well as the impact of internship programs. In this regard, Parishani & Khorooshi (2016) consider the lack of necessary training for mentor teachers as one of the main challenges of the internship program in Iran. Bukalia (2012) also points to the conflict between the role of the mentor teacher and the classroom teacher due to the lack of necessary training to distinguish these two roles, and considers this issue one of the important factors causing improper implementation of the internship program.

The professional competence of the student-teacher is also composed of organizing themes such as the skill and capability gap, lack of motivation, and low self-efficacy, which mentor teachers identified as being formed from foundational themes such as inability to manage complex situations, meaninglessness in goal-setting, learned helplessness, belief in incompetence, fatigue from repetition, negative internal self-talk, dependence on others' approval, and inefficient comparison. Student-teachers need to increase their self-sufficiency, competence, and psychological and technical capabilities during the internship period for their professional development, in which mentor teachers have an irreplaceable effect in guiding them.

Emotional resilience is another key concept that refers to the ability of individuals—especially mentor teachers and student-teachers—to cope with emotional challenges and pressures. This resilience includes not only the capacity for positive reaction to stress and educational problems, but also means that teachers can act with a sense of purpose and motivation in complex and changing educational environments. Studies show that teachers with higher emotional resilience are better able to respond to the emotional and psychological needs of students and also enjoy better mental health themselves. Enhancing resilience skills in training courses can help empower teachers and lead to improved quality of education. In this regard, Brackett & Mayer (2003) consider the ability to control emotions and overcome burnout as an important factor in the professional development of teachers. Emotional resilience is composed of organizing themes such as the emotional tensions of the student-teacher and mentor teacher, which are formulated based on foundational themes such as emotional fatigue from workload compression, burnout, the challenge of managing authority, the routine trap, fear of clients' judgment, and anxiety resulting from dual responsibilities. Increasing resilience in the teaching profession is an effective step in

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professional development in this job, because teachers deal with human beings, and the education of human beings requires great patience and forbearance.

Given what has been stated, it can be concluded that the main goal of Farhangian University and the internship curriculum is to prepare student-teachers in the best possible way to perform teaching duties in the future. Therefore, internship programs can provide a context for student-teachers to apply their skills in the best manner at their first real workplace. This experience can often be valuable for student-teachers, as it gives them a new perspective through which they can observe the best performance in their future job. If, during the internship period, mentor teachers properly perform their duties based on the goals set for the professional development of student-teachers, the effectiveness of these programs can be maximized. In fact, success in internship programs is a dominant factor in future career success. Therefore, attention to the opinions and perspectives of student-teachers by mentor teachers can be very effective and useful. Also, attention to the lived experiences of mentor teachers regarding the challenges and strengths of internship programs is effective for the professional development of student-teachers; because these statements not only express the strengths and weaknesses of the internship curriculum but can also be very helpful in the future for revising and improving this curriculum. Therefore, what was mentioned in this research as advantages and strengths should be considered and addressed more in upcoming meetings and workshops so that we can benefit from these advantages and strengths more strongly and systematically. Those themes that were stated as challenges and weaknesses require follow-up, review, and correction. However, this research has only addressed the views and lived experiences of mentor teachers. In order to enrich this research and achieve more comprehensive and complete results, the perspectives of other individuals and groups involved, such as professors, students, student administrators, and even officials of the education sector and university campuses, can be examined and researched.

Based on what has been mentioned, the results of the present study can open a new window for researchers, practitioners, planners, and policymakers of the internship curriculum at Farhangian University, and assist them in reviewing and improving the process of this curriculum. In this regard, and based on the obtained results, it is suggested that by conducting an appropriate needs assessment of mentor teachers—as the influential custodians of student-teacher training during the internship period—this curriculum be reviewed and revised, and the necessary flexibility for

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timing in implementation be considered. Providing necessary and continuous training to mentor teachers, creating a database regarding them, and offering career-related benefits to them are among other proposed solutions for enriching the internship program. Creating sufficient motivation through allocating in-service hours and paying overtime to mentor teachers can help the effective implementation of the internship program. Holding seminars, relevant and effective training and retraining courses for mentor personnel as well as student-teachers is emphasized for excellence in education and the purposeful implementation of the internship program. A mechanism should be foreseen for the appropriate organization of internship-implementing schools and mentor teachers. Developing a procedural manual and executive regulation for schools implementing the internship plan, containing the conditions and requirements of the internship plan such as human resources, space, and educational facilities. Designing and developing a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to oversee internship programs, as well as financial support for the internship program and considering incentive plans to create motivation among stakeholders, along with providing appropriate executive infrastructure, can improve many of the shortcomings of this curriculum.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Farhangian University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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