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Charting New Horizons in Teacher Education: How Practicum Students Empower and Support In-Service Teachers

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Abstract

Reciprocal learning, nurtured within a community of practice, is a cornerstone of teacher professional development. Despite extensive research on mentor-led support for student teacher (ST) professional development, the reciprocal potential of STs to transform and shape mentor teachers' (MTs) practices remains largely unexplored. This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the distinct perspectives of practicum students (PSs) concerning their ability to empower and support in-service teachers, exploring the impact of STs on the professional development of their MTs. A maximum variation sampling technique was employed to recruit 57 Iranian STs from diverse majors at Farhangian University. All participants had completed a minimum of 10 weeks of supervised teaching practice sessions at schools. In-depth, focus-group interviews were conducted to collect data, and thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the data using NVivo software version 10. The results demonstrated how the STs, armed with new insights and pedagogical expertise, were invaluable collaborators in accelerating the professional development of their MTs. This collaboration was particularly evident in essential teaching competencies, such as communication, planning and organization, assessment, classroom management, and specialized knowledge and skills in the subject matter and technology. The findings reinforce the effectiveness of practicum placements in developing higher-quality, in-service teacher-training programs. Policymakers and authorities are encouraged to consider these findings to improve the impact of STs in practicum courses, thereby promoting the overall quality of teacher education and teaching practices.

***Keywords*:** Mentor teacher, practicum student, reciprocal learning, student teacher, teaching practicum

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1. Introduction

As a crucial element of educational systems, teacher education has witnessed dramatic shifts in recent years, highlighting the pivotal role of practicum experiences in shaping the professional development of aspiring educators (Maddamsetti, 2018). The practicum experiences enable preservice teachers to interact with and learn from in-service teachers. The traditional practicum model in teacher education has been criticized for its emphasis on individual student performance and its lack of opportunities for collaboration and support among teachers (Zeichner, 2010). In recent years, there has been a growing movement to reform the practicum experience, with an emphasis on providing opportunities to empower and support in-service teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Practicum experiences can provide valuable opportunities for both preservice and in-service teachers. STs can benefit from the expertise of in-service teachers, acquire valuable teaching experiences, and cultivate their teaching skills and identities (Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Zeinali et al., 2023). Through their practicum, STs gain confidence in their teaching abilities and develop their self-efficacy (Montoya-López et al., 2020). In this regard, the support and guidance provided by MTs, principals, and vice principals play a crucial role in enhancing the self-efficacy and success of preservice teachers (Anderson et al., 2010; Ranjbari et al., 2021). The practicum experiences also lay the groundwork for preservice teachers to observe and participate in real teaching contexts, allowing them to practice what they have learned and acquire new skills (Altarawneh et al., 2023; Pinto-Llorente, 2019). The practicum experiences provide preservice teachers with chances to contemplate their teaching methods and make decisions grounded in their practical encounters (Martins et al., 2015). However, preservice teachers may encounter challenges during their practicum, including navigating the expectations of academic supervisors, cooperating schools, and cooperating teachers (i.e., MTs) and students.

This paper argues that a new practical approach based on empowerment, reciprocity, and cooperation is necessary. While the traditional practicum model focuses on preservice teachers receiving support and guidance, in this more reciprocal and collaborative approach, not only do aspiring teachers receive training and feedback, but in-service teachers, alongside their essential role of MTs, can reap the benefits of invigorating perspectives and creative approaches brought by STs to the classroom. This collaborative approach aligns with Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2024) perspective that PSs should be viewed as collaborators in the learning process rather than solely as learners. They would be urged to collaborate with in-service teachers to address issues, improve instructional strategies, and share their new knowledge and expertise. More precisely, the present study aimed to

explore the intricate dynamics of practicum partnerships, with a specific focus on how PSs support and empower in-service teachers. The study carries novelty since, to the best of our knowledge, it was the first to expand the current understanding of the significant presence of practicum teachers in school classes. It also addresses the common problem of top-down reforms that disregard the perspectives and experiences of those directly involved in the practicum process (Goodson, 2003). Accordingly, the following research question was formulated:

Do PSs empower and support MTs at schools? If yes, how?

2. Literature Review

The dynamic and ever-evolving nature of the teaching profession necessitates continuous professional development for educators (Sancar et al., 2021) to stay current, refine their instructional practices, and effectively address the diverse needs of their students. However, traditional approaches to professional development, such as workshops and in-service training courses, often do not offer continuous support and regular feedback, resulting in limited positive effects on classroom practices (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). Effective teacher preparation programs aim to equip educators with the skills, attitudes, and knowledge essential for success in the classroom. This process is achieved by creating learning opportunities based on experts' and peers' latest research and best practices (Pinto-Llorente, 2019). Emerging research encourages a more holistic and collaborative approach to professional development. This approach emphasizes the importance of learning as a collective endeavor that thrives through reciprocal interactions. By sharing their experiences, insights, and expertise, teachers can learn from each other's successes and failures, leading to more effective and meaningful professional growth (Lomos et al., 2011). Reciprocal interactions, which demonstrate and influence a mutual relationship supporting teacher learning and development, are paramount in fostering a collaborative learning environment (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). Such interactions can occur in various forms, including verbal and nonverbal communication, and promote learning through exchanging ideas and strategies (Bandura, 1986).

In recent decades, the teaching practicum has garnered significant attention from researchers (e.g., Altarawneh et al., 2023; Martins et al., 2015; Mtika, 2011; Pitfield & Morrison, 2009; Williams & Grierson, 2016). Practicum experiences, in which STs Work under the guidance of experienced MTs, offer a unique opportunity for reciprocal interactions and collaborative learning (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Zeichner, 2010). Practicum, a period of supervised teaching experience, is integral to teacher education programs worldwide. It lays the groundwork for STs to gain practical experience

applying theoretical knowledge and skills in real-world classroom settings (Abell, 2008).

Engaging in diverse activities such as lesson planning, delivery, assessment, and collaboration during practicum is crucial for STs' professional identity formation and readiness for the challenges of the teaching profession that lie ahead (Kennedy, 2016; Shaw, 2023). According to Atputhasamy (2005), the professional development of STs is remarkably influenced by the practical experiences provided by their MTs, including observation, feedback, and the implementation of teaching practices. In the field of teacher education, mentoring has been extensively researched. As highlighted by Clark and Marker (as cited in Kader, 2003, p. 10), "If, as the research indicates, practice teaching is the single most powerful intervention in teachers' professional preparation; then supervision [mentoring] is the single most powerful process in such intervention." Educators and teachers must collaborate and coordinate their efforts to implement mentoring programs effectively. MTs should prioritize establishing solid relationships of trust and rapport with their mentees and institutions (Mohono-Mahlatsi & Van Tonder, 2006). The significant impact of MTs' qualifications and teaching experience on STs' experiences have been well documented in the literature (Nyaumwe, 2001). In agreement, Marais and Meier (2004) also accentuated the necessity of ongoing professional development for MTs by creating guidelines that outline training opportunities.

Wang (2001) emphasized the noteworthiness of trainee teachers' relationships and interactions with tutors and teachers for their professional development and ongoing growth. The effectiveness of engagements relies on encouraging frameworks like collaborations between schools and colleges and on-site MTs in schools, which have varying impacts (Sivan & Chan, 2009). Effective collaboration with teachers in placement schools leads to "more peripheral forms of participation," (Wenger, 1999, p. 15) establishing a community of practice among teachers and novices. Supportive MT relation during the practicum enhances the commitment of trainee teachers to teaching (Guarino et al., 2006). Similarly, STs bring fresh perspectives, new ideas, and technological expertise to the classroom, benefiting MTs and their students (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005). Additionally, STs can offer valuable assistance in classroom management, lesson preparation, and student assessment (Zeichner, 2010).

Nonetheless, trainees find it challenging to apply a pedagogical theory in real school settings, a phenomenon known as the theory-practice divide (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005). MTs operate as role models, yet discrepancies between textbook concepts and real-world classroom practices can create confusion and undermine the learning experience for STs (Roness, 2011). The evaluation of aspiring teachers often reflects a philosophy misaligned with the

reality of school practices (LaBoskey & Richert, 2002). This misalignment emphasizes the necessity of a more seamless integration of theoretical concepts with practical application in teacher education.

A thorough literature review reveals that practicum experiences build confidence and self-efficacy, encouraging professional growth for both preservice and in-service teachers. Preservice teachers benefit from collaborative and reflective practicum settings, as evidenced by Glass and Walter's (2000) study, where participants reported increased confidence and teaching skill empowerment. Meanwhile, in-service teachers' mentoring preservice colleagues experience renewed motivation and engagement in their own practice (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). This reciprocal growth extends beyond mentoring roles, with Ciccomascolo and Brand (2022) highlighting preservice teachers' ability to contribute to supportive learning environments alongside in-service colleagues. Their newly acquired theoretical and research knowledge can contribute to in-service teachers' professional development and solidify their teaching identities (Bimantoro, 2020). Service learning opportunities further empower preservice teachers by allowing them to apply their knowledge in real-world community contexts, enhancing their confidence through authentic teaching experiences (Donnelly et al., 2023). Ultimately, practicum experiences foster integrated communities of practice for both preservice and practicing teachers through collaborative learning and mentoring (Adebola, 2022). This reciprocal interaction allows aspiring teachers to apply their learning in real-world settings and benefit from the expertise of experienced MTs (Bhebhe, 2022).

The practicum holds the key to unlocking new potential in teacher education. Instead of being seen as a one-way street of guidance, it can evolve into a vibrant arena for collaborative learning, where student and MTs blossom together through their shared knowledge and experiences. This transformative approach holds immense promise for the future of teacher development.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The study involved 57 STs, comprising 32 females (56%) and 25 males (44%), who were enrolled in practicum courses encompassing various disciplines within Farhangian University, including educational sciences (n = 9, 15.78%), teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL; n = 14, 24.56%), Primary Education (n = 11, 19.29%), Persian language and literature (n = 12, 21%), and physical education (n = 11, 19.29%). Table 1 presents the characteristics of the selected participants using maximum variation sampling to ensure diversity in the research. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 25, with a mean age of 22.7 (SD = 3.74). All students were completing their

practicum at schools in urban areas, with 52.6% (*n* = 30) placed in senior high schools, 26.4% (*n* = 15) in elementary schools, and 21% (*n* = 12) in junior high schools. Each participant was receiving continuous MTship from a school teacher. More than half of the participants (*n* = 36, 63%) had no further contact with the world of work and were full-time students, while 37% (*n* = 21) had some previous part-time teaching experience in schools and language institutes. The inclusion criteria for the study were enrollment in a practicum program at the time of the study and completion of at least 10 weeks of supervised teaching practice sessions at schools. Eleven participants (19.29%) were enrolled in Practicum I, 12 (21%) in Practicum II, 15 (26.3%) in Practicum III, and 19 (33.3%) in Practicum IV. The participants were divided into five focus groups, each comprising at least 10 STs. Participation was voluntary, and individuals were given the option to discontinue their involvement in the study at any given point.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	32	56
Female	25	44
Major		
Educational Sciences	9	15.78
TEFL	14	24.54
Primary education	11	19.29
Persian language and literature	12	21
Physical Education	11	19.29
Practicum-offering schools		
Elementary school	15	26.4
Junior high school	12	21
Senior high school	30	52.6
Teaching experience		
Yes	21	37
No	36	63
Practicum courses		
Practicum I	11	19.29
Practicum II	12	21
Practicum III	15	26.3
Practicum IV	19	33.3

3.2. Practicum Context

A crucial element of the teacher education program in Iran involves the practicum, which offers prospective teachers the chance to acquire experience in a real classroom environment and develop the skills required to begin teaching. In Iran, Farhangian University is responsible for delivering practicum courses to familiarize students with an authentic educational atmosphere. The practicum courses utilize three research methods: action research, lesson study, and narrative research. Additionally, the courses strongly emphasize fostering reflective observation, encouraging storytelling, and conducting thorough analyses of practical experiences. This approach aims to familiarize

prospective teachers with an authentic educational environment and enhance their skills through research-based methods and reflective practices. Education at Farhangian University is divided into two phases. During the first phase, students become familiar with theoretical and practical topics in the initial two years of their education. Throughout the next two years, students participate as PSs in schools and receive practical training under the supervision of experienced MTs. In the later phase, students are expected to complete four practicum courses over four semesters, with the following objectives:

- practicum I: reflective observation, situation study, and problem identification,
- practicum II: participation in teaching and learning activities,
- practicum III: pilot teaching and individual action research, and
- Practicum IV: lesson study and independent teaching.

STs receive at least three visits from the university faculty members during each practicum. These visits include consultation sessions with candidates and assessments of their teaching performance. Further, experienced teachers from the state schools where participants undertake their practicum are invited to serve as MTs. In this role, they provide guidance and feedback to assist STs in enhancing their teaching skills. After completing the practicum, STs become familiar with the teaching environment, acquire the necessary teaching skills, gain practical experience in education, and are well prepared to begin their teaching careers. The present study examined the perceptions and experiences of STs at Farhangian University to determine how they can support and empower their MTs.

3.3. Instrument

Qualitative data were gathered through focus-group interviews in a semistructured format. The optimal number of participants in a focus group typically ranges from six to 12 individuals (Moser & Korstjens, 2018), enabling a diverse range of perspectives while ensuring everyone can contribute to the discussion. Larger groups may become challenging to manage, as some participants may feel less inclined to share their thoughts, while smaller groups may limit the variety of viewpoints. In the present study, each focus group representing a specific major participated in a separate interview session. In other words, five focus groups were formed, and the breakdown of the group members (n =57) by major was as follows: educational affairs (n = 9), TEFL (n = 14), primary education (n = 11), Persian language and literature (n = 12), and physical education (n = 11).

A typical focus-group interview session usually lasts around 90-120 minutes. This timeframe allows for in-depth discussion without causing fatigue or losing focus among participants. It is crucial to balance the session duration,

ensuring enough time to explore topics without hindering active participation, or causing discomfort. The interview sessions lasted an average of 100 minutes. The interviews were conducted in a conducive and impartial environment on the university campus, deliberately chosen to promote participant comfort and openness. The interviews followed a semistructured format, combining predetermined, open-ended questions with the flexibility to explore emerging themes. This format balanced a focused exploration of critical topics and the natural flow of participant discussions.

The interviews were in Farsi to allow the participants to express their thoughts and emotions more fluently in their native language, and then they were transcribed and translated into English. A skillful interviewer (the third researcher of the study), aged 21, moderated the interview sessions. The interviewer had acceptable communication skills, was knowledgeable about the research topic, was skilled in running group discussions, was empathetic toward participants, and was capable of maintaining objectivity and neutrality throughout the sessions. She led the discussions using a set of open-ended questions, with a focus on the participants' practicum experiences and their perceptions of situations that empower and support the MTs. The STs were also queried about challenges they encountered in establishing empowering interactions with the MTs, proposing innovative teaching strategies to them, and sharing instances of mutual learning. Finally, they suggested improving collaboration and mutual learning in practicum courses. The interviewer utilized strategies to encourage active participation from all members, including inviting quieter participants to share their thoughts and managing dominant voices to maintain a balanced discussion. However, there was an emphasis on their voluntary participation in the interview sessions. Moreover, she managed to interrup the off-task discussions politely, maintain the research focus, consider the interview time successfully, and guide conversations without imposing biases and personal insights.

3.4. Procedure

The interview questions explored the PSs' perceptions of their contributions to in-service teacher training and to ascertain whether in-service teachers benefited from such collaborative interactions (see Appendix). The semistructured interview questions were carefully developed following a four-step process described below.

First, there was a thorough review of relevant literature, covering studies on teacher education (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2017), practicum encounters (Adebola, 2022; Marais & Meier, 2004), reciprocal learning, preservice educators (Bimantoro, 2020; Ciccomascolo & Brand, 2022; Maddamsetti, 2018; Martins et al., 2015), in-service teachers (Atputhasamy, 2005; Osamwonyi, 2016), mentor-mentee

relationships (Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Mohono-Mahlatsi & Van Tonder, 2006), practicum students' and mentors' challenges and opportunities (Bhebhe, 2022; LaBoskey & Richert, 2002; Mtika, 2011), and others. Second, consultation was undertaken with four subject-matter experts, all from Farhangian University, with an average age of 52 years. The panel of experts consisted of two assistant professors in TEFL, one assistant professor in primary education, and one assistant professor in educational affairs. In line with their inclusion criteria, the experts possessed an average of 10 years of teaching practicum courses at the university and willingly shared their valuable insights. The purpose of this consultation was to verify that the questions aligned with the study objectives and adequately addressed the intended spectrum of experiences. Their extensive decade-long experience in formulating and delivering practicum courses contributed significant context and comprehension to the research questions. After in-depth discussions with the experts, each question's clarity, relevance, and potential impact were confirmed. Some questions were deleted, and some others were modified. Moreover, two more questions were incorporated to extract concrete examples of support and collaboration. Following their thoughtful feedback, the interview questions gained depth and addressed a variety of aspects. Third, an assessment of content validity was carried out by computing the content validity ratio (CVR) through evaluations provided by experts for the final set of questions (n = 6). These experts subsequently rated the relevance and clarity of each question on a scale that ranged from 1 (not relevant/clear) to 4 (highly relevant/clear). The CVR score exceeded.80, confirming the content validity of the questions. Finally, the questions were pilotted with a small group of PSs (n = 4) to ensure they were understandable and engaging and did not lead to unintended responses. Minor adjustments were then made to improve the phrasing and flow of the questions.

Prior to joining the study, the participants received detailed information about the research objectives and willingly provided their consent, reflecting the voluntary nature of their involvement. Moreover, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, and the participants were informed that their responses would be used solely for research purposes without disclosing their identities. The focus-group interviews were structured and conducted systematically to ensure consistency and reliability of data collection. In this regard, five focus-group interview sessions with an average length of 100 minutes were conducted in a convenient place by a knowledgeable interviewer. Adopting a semistructured interview approach, the interviewer collected the required data in Persian. With the participants' consent, the sessions were audio recorded. Detailed notes were taken to supplement the recorded data. Then, the translated transcription and the notes were analyzed to extract relevant themes.

3.5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, a methodology for identifying and structuring shared experiential themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), was used to uncover patterns and recurring themes within the collected data. The initial step involved getting acquainted with the data through repeated readings of the interview transcripts. The researchers independently and repeatedly read the transcripts. Next, initial codes in the form of words, phrases, and sentences were generated by identifying data features that appeared "interesting to the analyst" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). The subsequent stage of data analysis involved advancing to the next phase, which included grouping the codes into more comprehensive themes. Each researcher independently identified overarching themes that emerged from each transcript, and any inconsistencies were resolved through discussion to improve the reliability of the analysis. The themes were organized to understand how STs empower and support in-service teachers comprehensively. The extracted themes were subsequently shared with the same team of experts, who also had expertise in qualitative research and methodology, encouraging discussion and refinement. In the next phase, the data were coded by theme using NVivo software version 10 by the first researcher, who extracted critical data representing each theme. The other researchers reviewed the data to ensure it aligned with the initial interpretation of the raw data and then shared and discussed it with experts. Further adjustments to the framework and interpretations were made due to this iterative process. Ultimately, the review process included engaging in discussions with the STs through a member-checking approach to validate the findings. The frequency and percentages of the extracted themes were also calculated.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

As presented in Table 2, in-depth, focus-group interviews with 57 PSs from various majors revealed two key themes: core teaching skills and specialized knowledge and skills, offering valuable insights into the participants' potential to empower and support their MTs.

Table 2

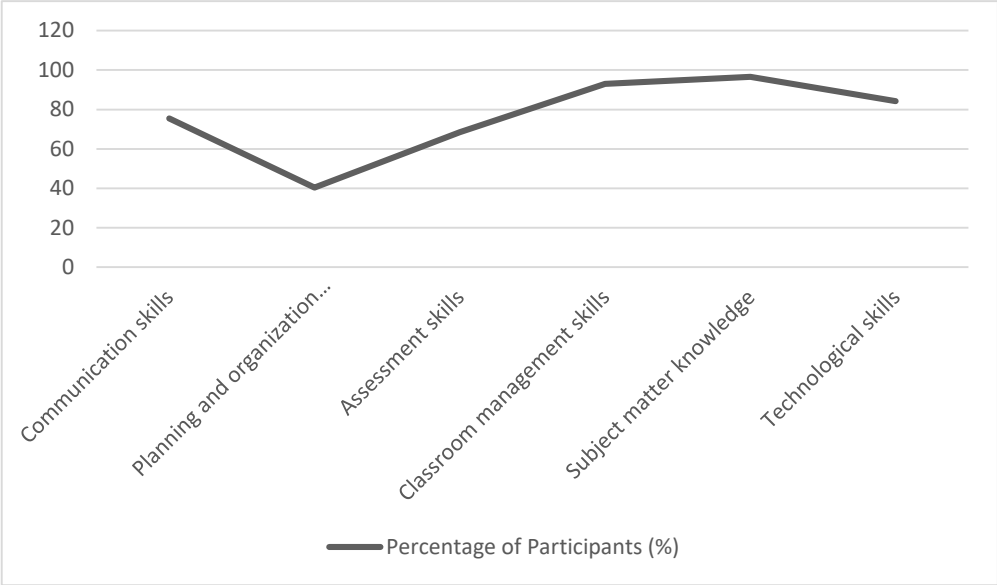
Summary of Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes	No. of participants	% of participants
Core Teaching skills	Communication skills	43	75.43
	Planning and organization skills	23	40.35
	Assessment skills	39	68.42
	Classroom management skills	53	92.98
Specialized knowledge and skills	Subject-matter knowledge	55	96.49
	Technological skills	48	84.21

Figure 1 presents the percentages of the subthemes in this study, indicating that subject-matter knowledge and classroom management were the participants' most frequently cited areas of contribution.

Figure 1

Percentages of Extracted Subthemes



4.1.1. Core Teaching Skills

This theme addresses the most essential skills for teachers and encompasses communication, planning and organization, assessment, and classroom management skills. As indicated in Table 2 and Figure 1, the subtheme most frequently mentioned was *classroom management skills*, with 92.98% of the participants reporting that they could help the MTs better manage their classes. The next most frequent subtheme was *communication skills*, with 75.43% of the interviewees offering new ideas and strategies to their MTs for more effective communication with their students. The subtheme *Assessment skills* was also frequent, with 68.42% of the participants providing

the MTs with feedback on their teaching practices to assist in-service teachers in identifying areas for improvement and developing new strategies for teaching their students. The subtheme *planning and organizational skills* was the least frequent (40.35%), addressing the participants' assistance for the MTs to stay up-to-date on the latest pedagogical research and practices.

The focus-group interviews indicated the improvement of the MTs' communication skills. For example, when the STs needed assistance in managing tasks, their MTs listened attentively, offered constructive feedback, and spared no effort to provide precise and clear instructions. Simultaneously, the STs served as a sounding board, providing a safe space for MTs to discuss challenges and successes. Consequently, MTs felt valued and learned from their mentees, and they contributed to a collaborative learning environment by effectively communicating new perspectives and teaching methodologies. Interviewee No. 7 highlighted the sentiment that "our collaborative discussions allowed us to share teaching strategies. It was a two-way street; they learned from our recent knowledge, and we learned from their years of experience." This collaborative exchange fostered an open dialogue beyond conventional teacher-student dynamics, creating a rich learning environment. One of the STs (Interviewee No. 8), completing Practicum I at a state school, reported her MTs' positive behavioral changes in treating her students, saying "Unlike the first and second sessions, she was not confrontational toward the students anymore." One TEFL ST confirmed this point by asserting, "… , we're starting to chat a bit more during my sessions with my MT…I feel it's partly because of what went down in my earlier teaching sessions."

Following the collaboration of another ST in a particular class, the MT displayed a heightened tendency to pose comprehension check questions and deliberately slowed down the pace of teaching, aiming to assist her students in keeping up with the lesson. According to Interviewee No. 12, the teacher started changing her strategy when she observed her mentee's teaching strategy enriched with follow-up/comprehension check questions and positive feedback to students. The same MT noticed her students' "aroused eagerness and engagement in learning." Similarly, the teacher realized "the importance of slowing down the teaching pace," as Interviewee No. 8 explained.

From another perspective, the MTs were also attracted by the STs' creative activities, thereby encouraging their mutual communication. An ST in educational affairs described that "when entering the school, the MT wasn't particularly friendly. However, by the third or fourth session, when we began crafting the boards by sketching pictures, she gradually became more amiable, opening up about her personal experiences." (Interviewee No. 37)

The evidence suggested the MTs improved their planning and organizational skills when observed and monitored by the STs, as they mostly preferred to seem professional in teaching. Moreover, the STs undertook

shared responsibilities for lesson planning within a small community of practice. They attempted to develop well-structured lesson plans, laying the appropriate grounds for peer learning for their MTs. A preservice teacher (Interviewee No. 16) said, "By sharing our lesson plans with the mentor before the class, he could provide valuable insights and suggestions."

The interviewees acknowledged the reciprocal nature of learning, emphasizing how the STs contributed to developing their MTs' assessment skills and strategies by providing students with written and audio feedback, using dynamic and formative assessment techniques to monitor learners' progress, and considering washback effects. Interviewee No. 2 noted, "Despite having three years of experience, she often sought my advice on her tests or tasks." Many PSs also reported that the teachers directly involved them in assessing and evaluating students' progress and achievements and asked them to use formative or summative assessment approaches. Their active participation in assessments challenged the traditional mentor-mentee dynamics and motivated MTs to reconstruct their evaluation and assessment knowledge.

The collaborative setting fostered by practicum placements was instrumental in improving classroom management skills for both STs and MTs. A female ST in special education taking Practicum III referred to classroom management techniques they proposed to their MTs, "… when students neglect their homework, she [the mentor] refrains from imposing punishments and instead employs techniques we suggested to discourage them from repeating the same mistake." (Interviewee No. 40). Interviewee No. 8 confirmed this issue, noting that "when the teacher gets upset, and the class becomes a bit hectic, …I engage in light-hearted banter with both the teacher and the students. It helps create a calmer atmosphere, allowing my teacher to cool down gradually."

Their shared responsibility for classroom dynamics allowed for an integrated approach to management, blending the STs' enthusiasm with the MTs' seasoned expertise and establishing remarkably positive changes in the learning environment after a few sessions of the STs' participation in the school classes.

4.1.2. Specialized Knowledge and Skills

This theme refers to skills specific to the taught subject matter, containing both the knowledge of the subject matter and technological skills. As presented in Table 2 and Figure 1, the most prevalent subtheme in this category was subject-matter knowledge (96.49%), followed by technological skills, with 84.21% of the interviewees acknowledging the critical role of these skills in enabling the MTs to exploit technology effectively in their classrooms.

Almost all participants recognized the vital role of subject-matter knowledge in reminding the MTs of outdated methods and informing them of modern teaching strategies and techniques. The interviews documented the exchange of subject-matter knowledge between PSs and MTs and their more enriching professional development experiences. The participants allowed their MTs to stay updated on current teaching research and trends. In line with this theme, Interviewee No. 7 shared with us the following point: "by encouraging a more collaborative and meaning-focused teaching approach, I inspired him to adopt a new method that actively engages students in the learning process." This participant also exemplified this statement: "My mentor was heavily focused on GTM, and I highlighted the consequent lack of communication among his students."

This interdisciplinary knowledge exchange contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, creating a learning environment where expertise was drawn from various fields of knowledge. Interviewee No. 20 supported this finding by mentioning, "… we primarily attempted this by offering exercises and providing feedback to students on recently taught subjects." Over several sessions of mentorship, the MTs gradually became more competent in elaborating on complex concepts and responding thoughtfully to their students' inquiries.

Some other participants introduced books recently published, or used in language institutes, to their mentors and provided detailed explanations of teaching methods. Interviewee No. 42 noted that she "actually attempted to reintroduce the teacher to some books commonly taught in language institutes." The use of realia was also mentioned by Interviewee No. 10, who had seven years of teaching experience in language institutes:

> As the activity unfolded, I observed my mentor watching me with curiosity and interest. … I ensured to engage my mentor in the group activities, encouraging active participation and contribution alongside the students. Following the session, I seized the opportunity to discuss the rationale behind the teaching approach, explaining how I enhanced the lesson's content by making it more relevant and tangible through the use of realia.

The extracted data revealed the positive impact of the participants on their MTs' technological skills. The PSs introduced innovative teaching practices supported by technological expertise. In this case, Participant No. 13 was of great help to the mentor, explaining "our mentor was not acquainted with even the most basic technologies, such as PowerPoint and Microsoft Word. … We assisted her in acquiring fundamental technological knowledge and getting familiar with the software." Interviewee No. 10 also raised another point and added, "Despite its apparent simplicity, my mentor was unaware of QR codes for audio files in school books, and he encountered difficulties in

broadcasting them. I guided him on the correct usage of these codes." The collaborative exploration of technology enriched the classroom experience and underscored the adaptability of both STs and in-service educators in embracing contemporary teaching methodologies.

The findings highlight the valuable contributions of PSs to in-service teacher training programs. To conclude, drawing upon the words of Interviewee No. 38, "… actively participating in collaborative lesson planning and coteaching sessions enabled us to leverage our individual strengths, exchange diverse viewpoints, and experiment with innovative teaching techniques. I believe this added significant value to our learning experience."

4.2. Discussion

This study provides insight into the complex dynamics of practicum assignments and their substantial effects on the professional growth of teachers currently in service who function as MTs in school classrooms. The two extracted themes are core teaching skills and specialized knowledge and skills, with the subthemes of communication skills, planning and organization skills, assessment skills, and classroom management skills for the former theme and subject matter knowledge and technological skills for the latter. These themes expressly delineate the depth and breadth of the reciprocal learning experiences within a collaborative community of practice.

Osamwonyi (2016) discusses the significance of professional skills for educators and their difficulties in acquiring and maintaining these capabilities and advocates for increased funding for teachers' professional development. The researcher also addresses the challenges teachers face in developing and sustaining their professional skills, including a shortage of resources and support. Supporting teachers' professional development is a way to ensure that every student has access to top-notch instruction.

The findings suggest that ST-led practicums promote collaborative learning by challenging established educational hierarchies and providing ample support. The open exchange of ideas and knowledge can reshape the professional development landscape by reflecting shared responsibilities and mutual growth. These findings align with contemporary educational theories, underscoring the significance of social interaction, collaboration, and collective engagement in learning.

According to the interviewees, communication skills are crucial for establishing a collaborative exchange of in-service teachers with STs and their students in school. The open dialogue facilitated a two-way flow of knowledge, where the experienced teachers' expertise intersected with the STs' fresh perspectives. This finding aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, underscoring the significance of social interaction in the process of learning (Lantolf, 2000).

Concerning learning and organization skills, the community of practice model has been revealed to be effective in structuring lessons and enriching them with diverse insights (Pyrko et al., 2017). This collaborative planning approach resonates with the idea that collective engagement in educational processes enhances overall teaching effectiveness (Nguyen et al., 2021). The contribution of STs to this area could also free up MTs of some responsibilities, allowing them to concentrate on other essential aspects of their work, such as curriculum development and student learning assessment.

Assessment skills were also necessary for reciprocal learning and challenged the traditional mentor-mentee dynamic. The active involvement of preservice teachers in assessments underpinned a paradigm shift toward a more egalitarian approach (Hou et al., 2022), where contributions from both parties—the teacher and students—were valued. This perspective is consistent with contemporary views on assessment as a collaborative and formative process (Clark, 2010; Crossouard, 2009; Strijbos & Wichmann, 2018).

Concerning classroom management skills, the findings revealed a departure from the conventional top-down approach, echoing a shift toward learner-centered methods. The active participation of preservice teachers in shaping classroom dynamics demonstrated the adaptability of educational practices to incorporate a blend of enthusiasm and experience. This finding supports the idea that effective classroom management entails shared leadership and responsibility (Walker et al., 2021). Consistent with the findings of Mitchell et al. (2017), in-service teachers were assisted in realizing the significance of classroom management skills, moving beyond the notion of mere control of student behavior. Instead, they discovered that these skills involve creating a classroom environment where all students feel safe, respected, and engaged in learning.

The exchange of subject-matter knowledge also contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of various academic disciplines. The interdisciplinary nature of this knowledge exchange aligns with the holistic approach to education, emphasizing that effective teaching goes beyond pedagogical techniques to include a profound understanding of the subject matter (Benekos, 2016).

Lastly, technological skills indicated the adaptability of both STs and in-service educators to embrace modern teaching methodologies. The collaborative exploration of technology aroused a willingness to bridge the generation gap and integrate innovative tools into the learning environment. The effective use of technological skills significantly impacts student achievement (Qassrawi & Al Karasneh, 2023; Zare et al., 2016) and prospective teachers' ability to choose and use appropriate technologies in the instructional environment (Davoodi et al., 2021; Huynh & Nguyen, 2021).

These findings align with the existing literature. GAO and Watkins (2002) identified areas where PSs could assist, such as lesson planning, classroom management, and assessment. They accentuated the importance of providing PSs opportunities to develop skills in these areas. Walters et al. (2020) reported that the practicum was meaningful professional development for MTs, as the experience approximated a professional learning community. The study found that MTs experienced professional growth regarding their teaching identity and practices.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study, conducted within a cooperative community of practice or a professional learning community, explored PSs' perspectives on the power of reciprocity, peer learning, and mutual growth. The implications of this research extend beyond the immediate scope of the study. The study provides insightful findings for educational policymakers and authorities to optimize the role of preservice teachers in practicum courses to enhance the overall quality of teacher education.

Like other studies, this study suffers from some limitations. Firstly, the sample size of 57 STs from a single Iranian university restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data collected from focus groups may introduce bias due to groupthink or social desirability pressures, and further triangulation with other data sources is required to detect how PSs empower MTs. These limitations highlight the need for further research to build upon the findings and replicate this study in diverse settings to refine and broaden our understanding of the symbiotic relationship between STs and MTs. Moreover, additional research is required to explore further dimensions of this reciprocal learning dynamic. Furthermore, exploring how contextual factors affect the effectiveness of collaboration between STs and experienced teachers offers valuable insights for revisiting teacher education programs.

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Appendix

Focus Group Interview Questions for Practicum Students

1. Tell me about a specific time you helped improve your mentor teachers' professional development. Elaborate on what you did and how they felt about it.
2. Did you encourage your mentor teachers to be more reflective and innovative teachers? How did you support them in trying new teaching strategies or seeing things differently?
3. Did you share any new pedagogical knowledge or resources with your mentor teachers that they found helpful? Tell us about it!
4. Did you feel prepared to provide support and collaborate with your mentor teachers? If yes, what made it work? If not, what could have been better?
5. Based on your experience, what advice would you give to other practicum students who want to make a real difference for their mentor teachers?
6. Imagine you are the practicum program designer. Think big and tell me what changes you would make to create an even more amazing experience for both practicum students and mentor teachers, where everyone learns from each.