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Article

Mentoring Matters: Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Mentor Teachers' Competencies in the Practicum

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Abstract: This study explores preservice teachers' perceptions of what defines a qualified cooperating teacher in the teaching practicum. Adopting a phenomenological design, data were collected from 150 prospective teachers across multiple subject areas at a public university in Türkiye through semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using content and discourse analysis supported by MAXQDA. Findings show that preservice teachers identify communication, guidance and feedback, professional knowledge and planning, role modelling, and motivation as key qualities of a qualified cooperating teacher. Discourse analysis revealed recurring patterns of guidance, collegiality, support, and neglect, illustrating how practicum contexts construct power relations and identity recognition. Constructive feedback, collegial mentoring, and role modelling were viewed as most influential for professional growth, whereas inadequate communication, weak feedback, and authoritarian attitudes hindered development. By centering preservice teachers' voices, the study contributes to teacher education and proposes a multidimensional framework for redefining the role of cooperating teachers in teacher preparation.

Keywords: Teacher Education; Cooperating Teachers; Preservice Teachers; Mentoring; Reflective Practice

1. Introduction

In teacher education programs, practicum courses are regarded as one of the most critical stages where prospective teachers integrate theoretical knowledge with practical experience in their professional preparation process [1,2]. These courses not only provide prospective teachers with opportunities to apply instructional methods but also enable them to develop essential competencies such as classroom management, communication, professional responsibility, and reflective thinking. In Türkiye, the practicum process is carried out in collaboration between the Council of Higher Education (HEC) and the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), aiming to ensure that candidates experience the knowledge acquired at the faculty level within real classroom settings. However, the quality of this process is largely determined by the guidance skills of cooperating teachers, the feedback they provide, and the professional relationships they establish with the candidates [3,4].

From the perspective of prospective teachers, cooperating teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge but also serve as mentors, colleagues, role models, and sources of professional motivation. Qualitative studies indicate that prospective teachers' expectations of an effective cooperating teacher are generally clustered around guidance, continuous feedback, sincere communication, professional role modeling, and supportive attitudes [5,6].

However, the literature reveals that these expectations have predominantly been examined from the perspectives of cooperating teachers or academics rather than those of prospective teachers themselves [7]. This situation underscores the significance of studies that place prospective teachers' own experiences at the center.

From a theoretical perspective, the practicum process in teacher education can be explained through several frameworks. Social Learning Theory [8] emphasizes that prospective teachers acquire professional behaviors by observing cooperating teachers as role models. Sociocultural Theory [9] highlights that candidates' potential developmental zones are revealed through the guidance of cooperating teachers. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) underscore that learning is constructed through social interactions. In this regard, the cooperating teacher is positioned as a guide who uncovers the candidate's potential developmental zone [9]. Prospective teachers' growth in areas such as classroom management, material design, and understanding student behavior is supported through the direction provided by cooperating teachers [10]. From this perspective, a qualified cooperating teacher functions as a bridge between the candidate's existing competencies and their attainable potential.

In addition, Schön's concept of reflective practice—also referred to as "reflective application" or "practice based on reflective thinking"—emphasizes that the teaching profession inherently requires continuous self-evaluation and critical inquiry [11]. Reflective practice, as articulated by Schön, is the process through which teachers constantly review their own practices, learn from mistakes, and reconstruct their professional identity through a critical lens [11]. Since teaching is by nature a profession characterized by uncertainty and complexity, reflective practice is indispensable for the development of prospective teachers [12]. Research demonstrates that reflective thinking enhances prospective teachers' self-efficacy and contributes to their ability to enter the profession with greater awareness [13].

Practicum serves as a professional development opportunity for all prospective teachers. Through this process, prospective teachers engage in reflective thinking that enhances their technical skills, fosters the development of their pedagogical decision-making processes, and professional perceptions [12,13]. Also, a qualified cooperating teacher is the one who supervises candidates' experiences reflectively by contributing constructive feedback that fosters them to judge their own teaching. In this process, candidates rise questions of "What did I do?", "Why did I do it?", and "How can I do it better?" [14].

In recent years, the concept of teacher noticing has gained prominence in the teacher education literature. It refers to teachers' ability to recognize classroom events in the moment, interpret them pedagogically, and make appropriate instructional decisions [15]. In other words, a teacher should not only be able to answer the question "What happened?" but also "Why is this situation important?" and "How should I respond to it?" Jacobs, Lamb, and Philipp [16] define this process as "professionally noticing students' thinking" and emphasize its critical role in the development of prospective teachers during the practicum.

The teacher noticing framework [15] emerges as a fundamental theoretical tool for developing prospective teachers' abilities to focus on classroom events, attend to students' thinking, and make pedagogical inferences. The noticing process enables prospective teachers to move beyond the role of a mere "observer" and to analyze what classroom interactions signify pedagogically. For example, instead of perceiving a student's incorrect solution solely as an "error," the candidate learns to recognize the underlying modes of thinking that produced the response. When cooperating teachers direct candidates' attention to such critical pedagogical moments, they contribute significantly to the development of candidates' professional vision [15,17].

The Birgin and Eryılmaz study shown that cooperating teachers' guidance plays a decisive role in the development of prospective teachers' classroom noticing skills in the Turkish context [18]. Similarly, van Es and Sherin highlight that prospective teachers' pedagogical understanding directly influence their in-class decision-making processes [17]. Therefore, a successful cooperating teacher has a dual responsibility; support candidates in "making observations" and guide them through reflective discussions.

Moreover, research explicates that the teaching practicum is not simply a stage in which prospective teachers expand their teaching skills and experience but at the same time, a learning hub or an incubator where cooperating teachers assess and redesign their own teaching practices [19]. This approach encourages candidates' active participation in the practicum by enabling the joint redesign of lessons, materials, and learning environments. Reflective practice and noticing processes also play a critical role in these design cycles, as candidates not only experience lesson implementations but also engage in analysing, critiquing, and restructuring them together with cooperating

teachers. In this way, the cooperating teacher moves beyond the role of a passive mentor to become a co-learner and co-designer alongside the candidate [20]. Within this context, a qualified cooperating teacher does not simply expect candidates to implement ready-made plans but instead encourages them to actively participate in the process, develop alternative methods, and critically examine instructional strategies through reflective practices. Thus, the cooperating teacher transforms into a partner who learns and designs together with the candidate while also leading pedagogical innovations [21].

Moreover, the professional learning communities' approach [22] emphasizes the significance of collegial, peer-based relationships in teacher education. From this perspective, the relationship between the cooperating teacher and the teacher candidate should not be defined as a hierarchical master–apprentice model but rather as a horizontal and collaborative collegial partnership [21,23]. In such an environment, candidates can openly articulate their reflective thoughts, analyse students' thinking through the guidance of their mentors during noticing processes, and further develop their pedagogical decision-making skills [4,7].

Studies conducted in the national literature indicate that prospective teachers' expectations of cooperating teachers are largely centered on guidance, effective communication, and reflective feedback. For instance, Yüksel asserts that in some cases prospective teachers perceive their cooperating teachers as masters and extremely proficient; but in reality, this opinion diminished over time because of inappropriate professional guidance and motivational support [7]. Similarly, Gökçe and Demirhan emphasized that candidates particularly expect cooperating teachers to take a more active role in communication and feedback processes, highlighting that they should not only function as providers of knowledge but also serve as sources of morale and motivation [4]. These findings reveal that the role of the cooperating teacher in the national context is multidimensional, reinforcing the need to define a profile of the qualified cooperating teacher.

In these contexts, the quality of the cooperating teacher during the practicum directly influences candidates' professional development, teacher identity, and commitment to the profession. The integration of reflective practice and the teacher noticing framework into the practicum process enables candidates not only to gain experience but also to enhance their pedagogical awareness, learn from mistakes, and construct their professional identity with a critical perspective. This qualitative study focus on providing a broad understanding about the real classroom practicum experiences of prospective teachers.

1.1. Significance of the Study

Emphasis of this study is recognizing the critical position of cooperating teachers in the teacher education process. Prospective teachers are many times ambivalent partners of paracticum. However, their voices must be heard, this study expilicates how mentor teachers competencies are understood by their mentees. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes Schön's reflective practice method and Sherin and van Es's teacher noticing approach. Through this dual focus, the study suggests meaningful suggestions to the teacher education literature [11,15]. Also, by mergeing reflective practice and noticing approach through teacher candidates real experiences, we can understand how and why being a qualified cooperating teacher is important.

1.2. Research Gap

While numerous studies have examined the teaching practicum, most have prioritized the perspectives of cooperating teachers or faculty members [3]. Research focusing specifically on prospective teachers' expectations remains limited, and few studies adopt an interdisciplinary approach that compares experiences across subject areas. By foregrounding prospective teachers' voices, this study aims to provide a holistic definition of the qualified cooperating teacher, thereby addressing a critical gap in the literature [4,7].

1.3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to identify, from the perspective of prospective teachers, the qualities that define a qualified cooperating teacher. Drawing on the candidates' practicum experiences, the study examines the strengths and weaknesses of cooperating teachers, their modes of guidance, feedback practices, and contributions to candidates' professional identity development. In doing so, the research seeks to make prospective teachers' expectations visible and to offer a multidimensional framework for understanding the quality of cooperating teachers.

1.4. Research Problem

The teaching practicum represents a critical stage in prospective teachers' preparation, integrating theoretical knowledge with practice. However, the success of this process largely depends on the qualities of cooperating teachers, such as providing guidance, feedback, communication, and serving as role models. National and international literature presents diverse and sometimes contradictory findings regarding the role of cooperating teachers. While some studies highlight their supportive impact on candidates' professional development, others reveal that deficiencies in communication, inadequate feedback, or authoritarian attitudes negatively affect the process [4,5,7,23]. This situation brings forth the question, "What defines a qualified cooperating teacher?" as a timely and significant research problem.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

To investigate how teacher candidates view instructional methods and what they look for in a qualified mentor teacher, a qualitative research strategy was used in this study. Because it enables a thorough investigation of people's experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they attach to processes, qualitative research was judged suitable [24,25]. To gain a deeper understanding of pre-service teachers' experiences with mentor teachers, a phenomenological approach was employed. By analyzing common experiences, the phenomenological method seeks to uncover the fundamental nature [26,27]. As a result, the opinions of teacher candidates were used to assess their experiences during the practice procedure. This design decision is similar to how phenomenology is used in the international literature to gain a deeper understanding of pre-service teachers' experiences.

2.2. Study Group

The study group consisted of a total of 150 prospective teachers enrolled in different subject areas (Turkish, English, Early Childhood Education, Science Education, Social Studies, Special Education, etc., see **Table 1**). Criterion sampling, a type of purposive sampling method, was employed in selecting participants. The criteria required that prospective teachers be in their fourth year of study and have completed at least one semester of the "teaching practicum" course. This ensured that participants had direct experience with cooperating teachers, thereby enhancing the reliability of the data [3,28,29]. Participants were selected on a voluntary basis, and candidates from various departments were included to ensure diversity.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

Variable	Category	f	%
Gender	Female	102	68.0
	Male	48	32.0
Department/Field	Elementary Education	28	18.7
	Turkish Language Education	20	13.3
	English Language Education	15	10.0
	Early Childhood Education	22	14.7
	Science Education	18	12.0
	Social Studies Education	15	10.0
	Special Education	17	11.3
	Art Education	8	5.3
	Music Education	7	4.7
Total		150	100

2.3. Data Collection Tools

Data were gathered through two instruments: a Personal Information Form and a Semi-Structured Interview Form. The personal information form was used to collect demographic data such as gender and field of study. The semi-structured interview form was developed based on a literature review and expert feedback [3,5,23]. It included questions addressing candidates' perceptions of support during practicum, expectations of a qualified cooperating teacher, feedback practices, contributions to professional preparation, and suggestions for improvement.

These questions were designed to capture prospective teachers' practicum experiences in depth, consistent with prior international research highlighting the effectiveness of semi-structured interviews in this context [3,28,30].

2.4. Research Setting and Context

The data were collected from prospective teachers enrolled in teacher education programs at a public university in Türkiye. The practicum process is carried out within the framework of the teacher education undergraduate curricula regulated by the Council of Higher Education and the Ministry of National Education's policies concerning practicum schools. Within this context, prospective teachers have the opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge they acquire at the faculty level in real classroom settings. The present study was structured around prospective teachers' expectations and experiences regarding cooperating teachers in practicum schools [2].

2.5. Data Collection Process

The interviews were conducted with prospective teachers who participated voluntarily. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, and each session lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed and checked for accuracy. Participants' identities were kept confidential, and ethical principles were strictly observed [31].

2.6. Data Analysis

Discourse analysis components were used to support the content analysis used to examine the data. The study followed a series of iterative steps, as described by Elo and Kyngäs [32]: codes were aggregated into subcategories, meaningful units were subjected to open coding, and transcripts were read numerous times for familiarization. A codebook with definitions and sample passages was created. Following the consolidation of subcategories into more general categories and overarching themes, these were examined in light of the research questions and improved as needed [33]. To maintain rigor and transparency, the final themes were presented along with frequency data and representative quotes.

Participants' verbal utterances were methodically coded and converted into categories and themes as part of the discourse-based content analysis. Content analysis places these discourses inside larger topic structures, improving the generalizability of findings, whereas discourse analysis reveals deeper meanings at the "linguistic level." The goal of discourse analysis is to make clear how language use shapes identities, power dynamics, and social interactions [34]. Discourse analysis results in qualitative research can be organized into higher-order themes using content analysis, going beyond descriptive descriptions [33,35]. During this procedure, discursive types—such as guidance, collegiality, support, and neglect—that were identified through discourse analysis are first converted into codes and categories before being incorporated into broader themes [32,36]. For example, a candidate's statement, *"It was very valuable that she treated us like colleagues,"* can be identified as a discourse of collegiality through discourse analysis. This discourse may then be categorized under the code "acting as a colleague," included in the category of "communication and interaction," and finally conceptualized as part of the theme "supportive aspects." In this way, linguistic meaning units extracted from discourses are transformed into broader thematic structures through content analysis, providing a holistic explanation of the study's findings.

In this study, discourse analysis identified discourse types such as "guidance," "collegiality," "support," and "neglect." The coding process was conducted independently by two researchers and subsequently compared to reach consensus, thereby enhancing internal validity [37]. To ensure systematic analysis of qualitative data, the MAXQDA 2024 qualitative data analysis software was employed. This software provided a robust analytical infrastructure for coding, categorization, theme development, and visualization [38]. Interview transcripts were imported into MAXQDA, and steps of open coding, code integration, and grouping under higher-order categories were carried out.

2.7. Validity and Reliability

Reliability and validity are considered fundamental criteria for ensuring that results in qualitative research are scientifically reliable. Therefore, verifiability, reliability, transferability, and dependability were considered in this study [29, 37]. To ensure the reliability of the data, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, participants' consent was obtained, and direct quotations were used. Thus, the authenticity of the participants' experiences was

preserved [25]. Coding was performed separately by both researchers, and disagreements were resolved through consensus. Expert opinions were sought, results were confirmed with selected participants, and member checks were performed [24]. For transferability, the research context, participant characteristics, and data collection procedure were described in detail. Demographic information such as participants' departments and genders was reported to facilitate the application of findings to similar settings.

From the development of the instruments to the conduct of the interviews, all stages of the research have been described in detail in terms of reliability. According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, inter-coder reliability was calculated to ensure consistency in the analysis. This was done to reduce researcher subjectivity and enhance verifiability [33]. Categories and themes were identified, and the entire process was made analytically auditable [37]. Independent experts were consulted during the process to reduce researcher bias. However, the combination of these strategies increased the reliability and validity of the findings, grounding the research results in a scientific basis.

2.8. Researcher Role and Reflexivity

The researchers' backgrounds in teacher education were critically reflected upon throughout the study to account for potential biases and power dynamics. Reflexive notes were systematically maintained during data collection and analysis to ensure transparency. Notably, some of the researchers had prior teaching experience, and one of them was actively engaged in the teaching profession during the study. This dual positioning provided valuable insider perspectives but also required careful reflexivity to balance proximity with analytical distance. An ethical stance was consistently adopted, framing the candidate–researcher relationship based on collegiality rather than hierarchy.

2.9. Sample Size Justification

The sample size was guided by the principles of information power and thematic saturation. Data collection was concluded once recurring responses no longer produced new codes or themes, with saturation achieved during the study (reached at approximately 150 participants).

2.10. Data Security and Management

The data were stored in encrypted digital environments and stripped of personal identifiers. The codebook, version records, and analysis outputs were securely maintained with access restricted to the research team only.

3. Findings

The aim of this study was to identify, from the perspective of prospective teachers, the qualities that a qualified cooperating teacher should possess. The findings of the research comprehensively reveal the various dimensions of mentoring in the teaching practicum. These findings are presented in relation to the support and guidance prospective teachers received from their mentors during the practicum; the professional and personal qualities expected of a qualified cooperating teacher; candidates' views on mentors' feedback practices; aspects perceived as most effective in preparing candidates for the profession; and areas requiring improvement in the practicum process. In this context, the themes obtained for each sub-objective are illustrated in **Figure 1**.

3.1. Supportive Aspects in the Teaching Practicum

Based on the findings obtained from the content analysis, the dimension of support received by prospective teachers from their cooperating teachers was examined under the themes of communication and interaction, guidance and feedback, planning and professional knowledge, serving as a professional role model, support and motivation, and negative experiences (see **Figure 2**). Participants most frequently emphasized the theme of planning and professional knowledge (f = 96), particularly highlighting the critical role of cooperating teachers in lesson planning, material development, and classroom management for their professional growth. Similarly, within the theme of communication and interaction (f = 92), the mentors' sincere attitudes, open dialogue, and collegial treatment of candidates were considered noteworthy. In the guidance and feedback theme (f = 81), constructive feedback from mentors was reported to help candidates recognize their strengths and weaknesses while enhancing their professional confidence. Under the theme of support and motivation (f = 70), candidates emphasized the importance of encouragement, morale boosting, and non-discouraging approaches in fostering positive attitudes toward

the profession. Another salient theme was professional role modelling (f = 48). Participants highlighted that exemplary teaching practices and role-model behaviours provided strong guidance in the development of their professional identities. Conversely, under the theme of negative experiences (f = 25), inadequate guidance and poor communication were mentioned, with some mentors being criticized for their indifferent attitudes toward candidates. These findings demonstrate that mentoring support constitutes a multidimensional structure: while positive and supportive experiences strengthen prospective teachers' professional development, inadequate guidance and communication deficiencies may negatively affect the process.

To provide a deeper explanation of the findings obtained through content analysis, a discourse analysis of participants' statements was conducted. This analysis revealed three dominant discourses related to supportive aspects:

1. Guidance Discourse – Expressions such as "providing direction," "being there for us," and "correcting mistakes" positioned mentors as guides, resembling a master–apprentice relationship.
    - Example: "*She guided me while preparing the lesson plan.*" (S1)
2. Collegiality Discourse – Phrases such as "treating us like colleagues" and "seeing us as teachers" reflected prospective teachers' desire to be recognized with their professional identity.
    - Example: "*It was very valuable that she treated us not as interns but as teachers.*" (S2)
3. Support and Morale Discourse — Statements such as "encouraging" and "giving morale" indicated that mentors were perceived not only as knowledge transmitters but also as figures providing emotional support.
    - Example: "*She was usually by our side and gave us morale.*" (P15)
4. In contrast, some statements revealed a Neglect Discourse. Phrases such as "she did not care" and "we were left as mere observers" suggested that prospective teachers were sometimes positioned as apprentices or secondary figures.
    - Example: "*Unfortunately, some teachers did not pay much attention to us.*" (SE1)

These findings indicate that prospective teachers perceive cooperating teachers not only as providers of professional knowledge but also as figures who acknowledge their identities, accept them as colleagues, and respond to their emotional needs. At the discourse level, the languages of guidance, collegiality, and support emerged most prominently, while the neglect discourse pointed to inequalities and power dynamics within the practicum process.

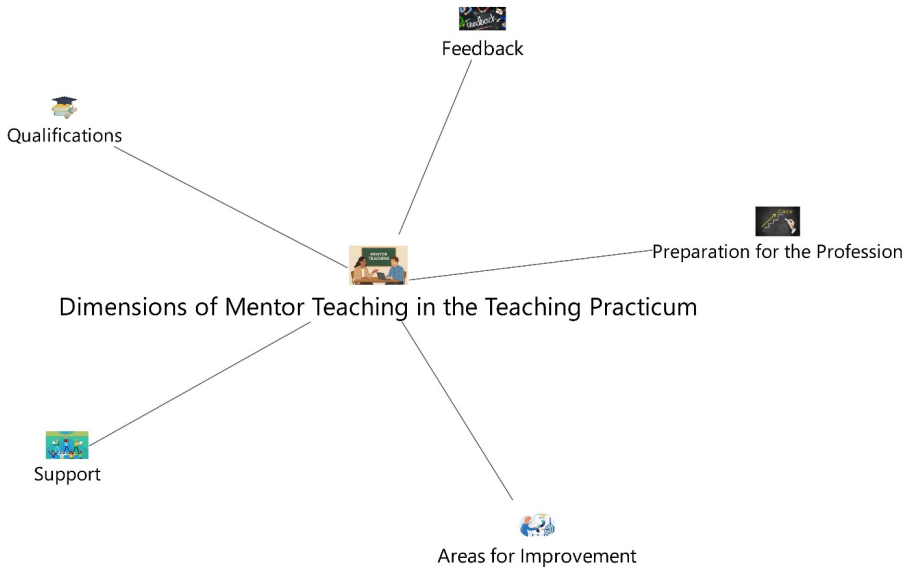

Figure 1. Mentoring Themes in the Teaching Practicum.

Figure 2. Supportive Aspects in the Teaching Practicum.

3.2. Qualities of a Qualified Teacher

In this study, prospective teachers emphasized that the qualities of a qualified cooperating teacher were grouped under the themes of communication and interaction, planning and professional knowledge, guidance and feedback, professional role modelling, and support and motivation (see **Figure 3**). Participants most frequently pointed to guidance and feedback (f = 120), highlighting the critical role of continuous and constructive feedback in their professional development. In this regard, the guidance provided by mentors was reported to contribute significantly to the improvement of candidates' teaching skills. Similarly, the theme of planning and professional knowledge (f = 119) emerged prominently, with candidates stressing that mentors' guidance in lesson preparation, classroom management, and subject knowledge played a fundamental role in preparing them for the profession. In the theme of communication and interaction (f = 100), openness, sincerity, and equality were foregrounded. Candidates expressed that the quality of the practicum process improved when mentors established collegial, open, and sincere communication with them.

On the other hand, the theme of professional role modelling (f = 58) underscored personal qualities such as discipline, empathy, patience, and respect. Candidates emphasized that mentors should act as role models not only in instructional but also in ethical and human dimensions, which were deemed decisive for the development of professional identity. Lastly, under the theme of support and motivation (f = 50), candidates highlighted the importance of encouraging, morale-boosting, and non-discouraging attitudes in fostering positive perceptions of the teaching profession. These findings indicate that a qualified cooperating teacher should embody an integration of both professional knowledge and skills with personal values and attitudes. The roles of mentors in guidance, communication, planning, and role modelling directly influence the professional development of prospective teachers.

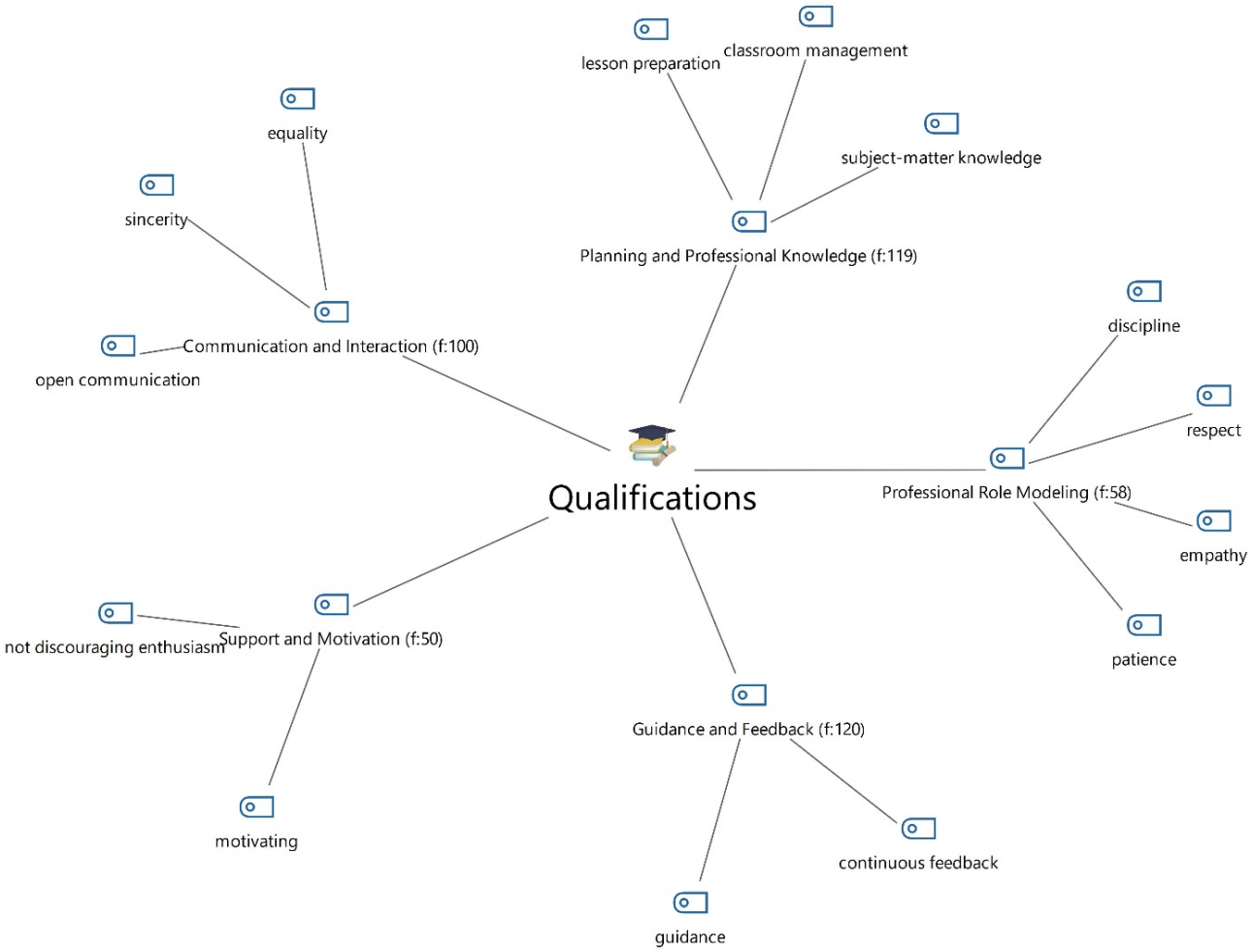

Figure 3. Qualities of a Qualified Teacher.

Discourse analysis of participants' statements revealed four dominant discourses:

1. **Guidance Discourse**
   Expressions such as "guiding," "being a mentor," and "providing continuous feedback" positioned the qualified teacher as a guiding figure who shares professional experience.

   - *"Feedback should always be constructive; not only the negative but also the positive aspects should be mentioned."* (S10)

2. **Collegiality Discourse**
   Phrases such as "seeing us as colleagues" and "treating us not as apprentices but as teachers" reflected candidates' desire to be recognized with their professional identity.

   - *"A student teacher should not be treated as an apprentice but as a colleague."* (SB3)

3. **Role Model Discourse**
   Concepts such as "patience," "empathy," and "respect" indicated that candidates positioned the cooperating teacher as a figure to be emulated.

   - *"A qualified teacher should be a patient guide who can empathize."* (F11)

4. **Supportive Discourse**
   Expressions such as "motivating" and "not discouraging" revealed that candidates perceived mentors not only

as knowledge providers but also as sources of morale and motivation.

- *"When a teacher candidate makes a mistake, the mentor should not discourage them but provide support."* (P15)

These findings demonstrate that prospective teachers view the qualified cooperating teacher both as a professional guide and as a collegial peer who acknowledges their identity. At the level of content analysis, themes such as communication, guidance, planning, and motivation were foregrounded, while at the discourse level, the language used by candidates revealed that their relationships with mentors were constructed around guidance, identity recognition, and role modelling.

3.3. Feedback Practices

In the study, the feedback prospective teachers received from their cooperating teachers was categorized under three main themes: constructive feedback, empowering feedback, and weak feedback (see **Figure 4**). The most frequently mentioned theme was constructive feedback (f = 116). Participants emphasized that mentors' balanced articulation of both strengths and weaknesses was highly beneficial for their professional development. Such feedback was reported to help prospective teachers recognize their strong points while improving weaker areas. In the theme of empowering feedback (f = 44), encouragement and confidence-building approaches were highlighted. Prospective teachers noted that mentors' supportive and confidence-enhancing feedback contributed to developing positive attitudes toward the profession. Conversely, in the theme of weak feedback (f = 28), some mentors were criticized for either not providing feedback or limiting themselves to superficial, general comments. Candidates indicated that such feedback did not meaningfully contribute to the teaching process and limited opportunities for growth. Overall, the findings demonstrate that feedback is a critical element shaping prospective teachers' professional development during the practicum; while constructive and empowering feedback supports the process, weak feedback undermines it.

Discourse analysis of participants' statements revealed four dominant discourses:

1. Developmental Discourse (guidance and learning focus)
   Feedback was described as provided through a "correction + suggestion + follow-up" cycle, delivered in a private and constructive manner.
   - *"Individual comments for each intern... Criticisms should not be given in front of students, but privately."* (S10)
   - *"After the lesson, I provided feedback, pointing out both what I found correct and what I found incorrect."* (T20)
2. Balance Discourse (integration of positive and negative)
   Candidates wanted not only their weaknesses but also their strengths to be made visible.
   - *"Not only the negative aspects but also the positive aspects should be addressed."* (T19)
   - *"Feedback should always be constructive; not only the negative but also the positive aspects should be mentioned."* (S10)
3. Authority/Judgmental Discourse (feedback as a mechanism of power)
   Some statements reflected feedback being perceived as a one-sided, authoritarian control mechanism.
   - *"They do not listen to correction suggestions, but insistently impose what must be done."* (S9)
4. Absence/Superficiality Discourse (making visible the lack of feedback)
   When feedback was not provided or remained superficial, candidates' professional identity was weakened.
   - *"Did not provide the necessary guidance... did not provide the necessary feedback at the end of teaching."* (SE1)
   - *"Constructive feedback... holding meetings to discuss lesson deficiencies and what needs to be done."* (M8) *(counterexample describing expected practice)*

The discourse of feedback thus either strengthened prospective teachers' recognition as "learning colleagues" (developmental/balance discourses) or weakened it (authority/absence discourses). This directly illustrates how power is constructed within the mentoring relationship.

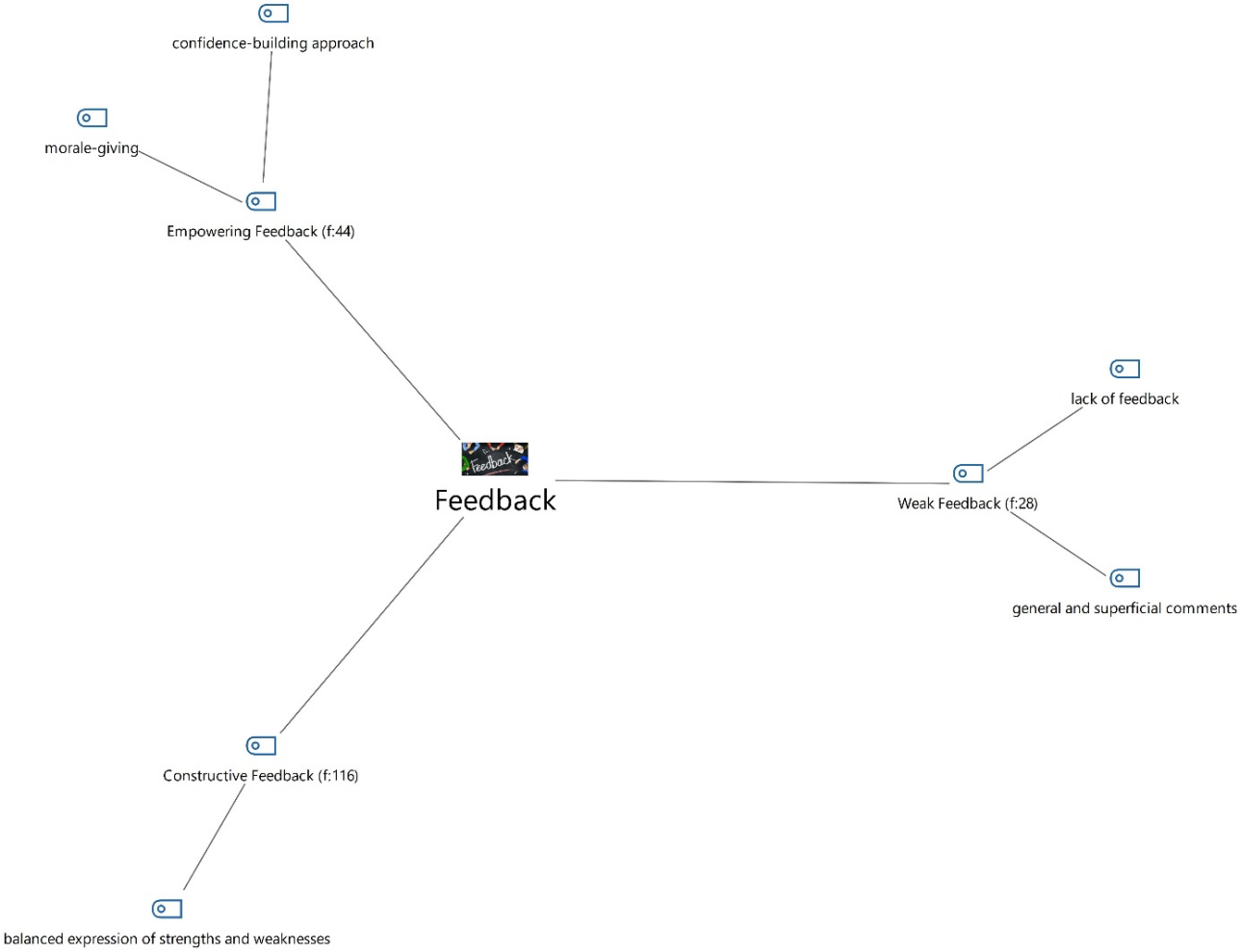

Figure 4. Feedback Practices.

3.4. Effective Aspects of Cooperating Teachers

The findings of the study revealed that preservice teachers' experiences with their cooperating teachers in the process of preparing for the profession were clustered under four themes: professional knowledge and planning, guidance, role modelling, and motivation (see **Figure 5**). The most frequently mentioned theme was professional knowledge and planning (f = 112). Participants emphasized that support from cooperating teachers, particularly in lesson planning and material development, was decisive in structuring their instructional processes. This indicates that cooperating teachers play a fundamental role in the development of preservice teachers' pedagogical skills.

The guidance theme (f = 63) highlighted the continuous support and orientation provided throughout the practicum, which helped preservice teachers gain confidence in their professional journey. In the role modelling theme (f = 51), classroom management examples were particularly prominent. Participants stated that the classroom behaviours and instructional styles of cooperating teachers served as guiding references for them. Finally, the motivation theme (f = 20) emphasized encouragement and fostering love for the teaching profession. Preservice teachers expressed that such attitudes contributed strongly to their professional identity formation.

Discourse analysis of participants' expressions revealed four dominant discourses:

1. Role Model Discourse (teaching by showing in practice): The mentor embodies the answer to the question "How does one become a teacher?" through their classroom behaviours.

    - *"Being successful in classroom management is crucial… once this is achieved, teaching runs smoothly."* (S4)
    - *"They teach us by conducting lessons not only with classical methods but also with creative and enjoyable approaches."* (T17)

2. Planning-Implementation Discourse (the technical mind of the profession): Lesson plans, materials, and classroom/time management establish professional self-confidence.

    - *"I provided information about lesson planning, classroom management, and time management."* (C1)
    - *"I guided them through preparing lesson plans, yearly plans, and units, and then included them in the process."* (T28)

3. Collegiality and Empowerment Discourse (opportunity and autonomy): Allowing preservice teachers to lead classes creates trust and turns mistakes into learning opportunities.

    - *"I never interfered during lesson delivery; my feedback came afterwards."* (S3)
    - *"I often left the classroom to let them gain experience."* (T17)

4. Emotional Labor and Trust Discourse (motivation and moral as professional capital): Motivation is intertwined with the sense of "being accepted as a teacher."

    - *"They never acted in ways that would discourage us."* (S7)
    - *"They made me feel confident about assuming authority and solving crises."* (OÖ16)

Figure 5. Effective Aspects of Cooperating Teachers.

Overall, preservice teachers perceive professional preparation as a synthesis of technical mastery, classroom role modelling, empowered practice, and emotional support. The language used positions the mentor not merely as a knowledge provider but as the one who initiates professional identity.

3.5. Expected Behaviors or Processes

In this study, the aspects that preservice teachers thought needed improvement in their experiences with mentor teachers were grouped under four themes: communication deficiencies, feedback insufficiencies, planning deficiencies, and negative experiences (see **Figure 6**).

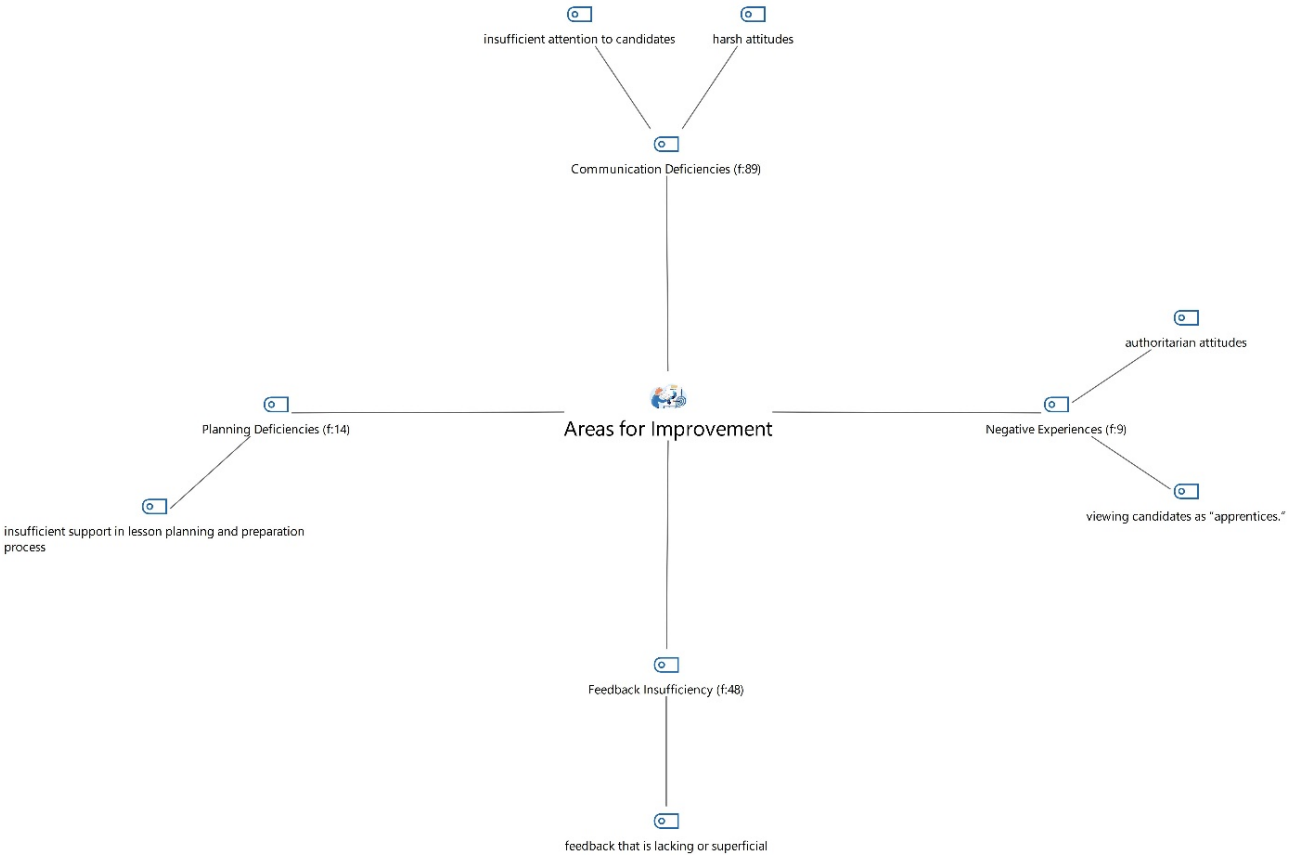

Figure 6. Expected Behaviours or Processes.

The theme with the highest frequency was communication deficiencies (f = 89). Participants stated that situations such as mentors not showing enough interest in candidates and displaying harsh attitudes negatively affected their motivation during the teaching process. This finding indicates that when effective communication is not established, the professional identity development of preservice teachers may be hindered.

In the theme of feedback insufficiencies (f = 48), the lack of feedback or its superficiality was criticized. Participants emphasized that constructive and continuous feedback is necessary for growth, whereas superficial feedback did not contribute to the process.

In the theme of planning deficiencies (f = 14), participants highlighted the lack of sufficient support from mentors during lesson planning and preparation. This was reported to cause uncertainty in the practicum process.

Finally, in the theme of negative experiences (f = 9), authoritarian attitudes and treating candidates as "apprentices" came to the forefront. Participants stated that this approach made them feel undervalued and weakened their sense of belonging to the teaching profession.

Overall, the findings reveal that mentor teachers need to assume a more supportive role in communication, feedback, and planning processes; otherwise, preservice teachers' professional development may be limited.

When participant statements were analysed through discourse analysis, six dominant discourses emerged:

1. **Recognition / Collegiality Discourse** (demand for status equality)
   - Candidates want to be seen with a teacher identity, not as "students."
   - *"Even though we are interns, we are also teachers… dismissive attitudes undermine us."* (S2)
   - *"I introduced the preservice teacher not as 'sister' but as 'teacher.' "* (T7)
2. **Planning and Transparency Discourse** (timely information, shared planning)
   - Early sharing of plans/schedules enables candidates' preparation.
   - *"If lesson plans were shared earlier, it would be more useful for designing activities."* (S16)
   - *"The teacher did not inform us in advance that she would not come; we had to cover the class."* (J4)
3. **Participation and Empowerment Discourse** (more teaching practice opportunities)
   - Candidates demand responsibility beyond observation.
   - *"I involve candidates in the process from start to finish; I give them opportunities to teach."* (T23)
   - *"It is problematic to leave the preservice teacher passive."* (S12)
4. **Communication / Manner Discourse** (respectful, private feedback)
   - Constructive feedback given privately is expected.
   - *"Criticism should not be made in front of students but in private."* (S10)
   - *"Mistakes should be explained in a way that does not break or discourage."* (T27)
5. **Institutional-System Discourse** (mismatch between department–school, tool quality)
   - Problems arise from mismatches in subject expertise and instructional tools.
   - *"Although our field is Japanese, our practicum was in English… they couldn't provide guidance."* (J2, J4)
   - *"The questions are too long… the font is too small… it makes it hard to focus."* (R6)
6. **Power and Authority Discourse** (criticism of imposition and one-sided control)
   - *"They don't listen to ideas; they insistently impose what should be done."* (S9)
   - *"Instead of mentoring, practicum teachers act like know-it-alls."* (OÖ13)

The desired changes concentrate on status equality, planned and transparent coordination, active empowerment, respectful and private feedback, and institutional alignment. The language clearly reflects candidates' demand to be recognized as colleagues and to have autonomous practice spaces.

The prevalence of developmental and balance discourses in feedback shows that preservice teachers' professional identity is constructed through guidance and collegiality, whereas authority and absence discourses hinder this construction. Role model and planning discourses align with the literature highlighting the decisive role of modelling and instructional design in mentoring [5,23].

4. Result and Discussion

The qualitative findings highlight several dimensions of pre-service teachers' experiences with their mentor teachers during the practicum, which can be interpreted considering existing research. Key themes that emerged include the support and guidance provided by mentors, the nature of feedback given, mentors' professional expertise and role modelling, the motivational influence of mentors, and areas needing improvement such as communication issues, lack of guidance, and authoritarian attitudes. These findings resonate with the broader literature on effective mentoring in teacher education, as discussed below.

4.1. Mentor Support and Guidance

A strong theme in the findings was the pivotal role of mentoring teachers' support and guidance. Pre-service teachers in this study valued mentors who were approachable, provided help with lesson planning and classroom management, and offered emotional support. This is consistent with prior research emphasizing that mentors need

to possess the skills to adequately support novice teachers in their endeavours [39]. Effective support often begins with a positive mentor-mentee relationship founded on trust, respect, and open communication. In fact, a trusting and respectful rapport is seen as a prerequisite for successful mentorship [23]. When mentors create a welcoming, collegial environment and treat student teachers as professional partners, it boosts the mentees' confidence and eases their transition into the classroom [40]. Participants' descriptions of mentors who acted more like collaborators than superiors align with the notion that an open, peer-like interaction can help pre-service teachers feel valued and more willing to seek guidance. Prior studies have noted that how mentors first receive and engage with their mentees sets the tone; a warm reception can motivate and encourage preservice teachers, whereas a cold or indifferent approach may hinder the relationship [41]. Overall, the support and guidance from mentors — whether through answering questions, advising on classroom strategies, or simply showing empathy — emerged as a multifaceted cornerstone of the practicum experience. This reinforces the idea that mentorship is "complex terrain" requiring careful attention to the mentor's interpersonal skills and adaptability to the mentee's needs. Mentor teachers who are receptive and provide steady guidance enable preservice teachers to develop greater teaching confidence and competence, as also reported by other researchers [40]. In contrast, a lack of support or guidance (e.g., mentors being unavailable or unapproachable) can leave prospective teachers feeling "on their own," an issue noted in some educational contexts where practicum mentorship has been described as "sink or swim" for the novice teacher [42].

4.2. Constructive Feedback

Another critical theme was the feedback that mentor teachers provided to pre-service teachers. Participants highlighted how constructive and timely feedback from mentors helped them recognize their strengths and weaknesses in teaching practice, thereby supporting their professional growth. This finding is bolstered by literature showing that meaningful feedback is a key driver of teacher learning. For example, a study by Al-Malki et al. found that receiving feedback boosts pre-service teachers' confidence and motivation [43]. Through constructive critiques, mentors enable novices to reflect on their lessons, identify areas for improvement, and refine their teaching strategies [44]. In this study, mentors' "balanced" feedback — acknowledging what was done well as well as what could be improved — was seen as especially helpful for building the candidates' self-efficacy. Such balanced, specific feedback aligns with best practices in mentoring, as it instils confidence while also guiding skill development [45]. Moreover, mentors who set aside time for post-lesson debriefings and reflection were regarded as instrumental to the mentees' professional development, echoing Hagenauer et al. who emphasize that regular feedback conversations can significantly enhance learning during practicum [40,45]. It is important to note that feedback is not just whether it is given, but how it is given. Mentors are most effective when their feedback is delivered in a supportive, non-judgmental manner. If feedback is overly harsh or communicated poorly, it can discourage rather than help the mentee. As Mukeredzi observed, "it is not what is said which hurts but how it is said," underscoring that the tone and approach to feedback greatly affect how the mentee receives it [46]. In line with this, Ambrosetti argue that mentor teachers should engage in training on providing constructive feedback in an inquiry-oriented, non-authoritarian way. Participants in the present study indeed raised concerns about instances of weak feedback — for example, mentors who provided only vague, cursory comments or failed to give feedback at all. Such minimal feedback was seen as a missed opportunity for growth, consistent with prior reports that superficial or infrequent feedback does little to improve teaching practice [41]. Overall, the findings reinforce that high-quality feedback is a cornerstone of effective mentorship. When done well, feedback fosters reflection, confidence, and a collaborative learning atmosphere [43,46]. Mentor teachers, therefore, must be skilled in observing lessons and communicating feedback in ways that encourage development rather than instill fear or defensiveness.

4.3. Mentor Teachers' Professional Competence and Role Modeling

In addition to technical expertise, mentor teachers served as role models in both teaching practice and professional demeanor. Participants frequently cited that observing their mentor's teaching style and classroom management provided a template for their own practice. Mentors who exemplified effective teaching—through engaging lesson delivery, use of strategies, and responsiveness to students—allowed pre-service teachers to learn by example. Beyond instructional techniques, mentors' personal attributes (such as patience, empathy, enthusiasm,

and professionalism) also set a standard for the kind of teacher the mentees aspired to become. This finding is echoed by prior studies indicating that mentors significantly shape novice teachers' emerging professional identity by modelling what it means to be a good teacher [47, 48]. Indeed, mentor modelling is recognized as a key component of impactful mentoring, alongside providing feedback and guidance [49]. When mentors "walk the talk"—demonstrating high-quality teaching as well as ethical and reflective practice—they give mentees a concrete vision of effective teaching to emulate. Participants in this study noted that seeing mentors handle real classroom challenges and maintain professional standards (e.g. showing respect for students, demonstrating commitment to the profession) had a powerful influence on their own development. This aligns with the concept that mentors contribute to the formation of pre-service teachers' professional identities by acting as exemplary in both instructional and interpersonal realms. In summary, the mentor's qualifications and professional know-how, combined with their ability to model the attitudes and behaviours of an effective teacher, were found to directly enhance the mentees' learning-to-teaching process [46]. Conversely, if a mentor lacked up-to-date pedagogical knowledge or did not demonstrate good teaching practices, mentees in some cases felt less prepared—underscoring the need for mentors to be not only experienced teachers but also competent in mentoring skills.

4.4. Motivation and Encouragement

Mentor teachers' influence on motivation emerged as another notable theme. Participants reported that mentors who offered encouragement, positive reinforcement, and enthusiasm had a markedly positive impact on their morale and commitment to teaching. Many pre-service teachers cherished mentors who celebrated their successes, reassured them during challenges, and maintained an uplifting, non-discouraging attitude. Such supportive encouragement helped the novices develop a more positive attitude toward the teaching profession and increased their self-confidence in their abilities. This observation is well-supported by literature: when mentors provide psychosocial support and make mentees feel valued, it tends to boost the mentees' motivation and sense of efficacy [40]. Research also suggests that feedback which is not only constructive but also empowering—for example, highlighting improvements and offering praise for effective practices—can reinforce a novice teacher's confidence and motivation to continue improving. Several participants mentioned that their mentors helped them "love the profession" by modelling dedication and by cheering on the mentee's progress. On the other hand, the data also contained cautionary notes that negative mentor behaviours can undermine motivation. If a mentor was overly critical, distant, or dismissive of the mentee, it sometimes left the pre-service teacher feeling demoralized or doubting their fit for the profession. This corresponds with findings by Straus et. al. that negative mentoring experiences—such as being stigmatized as "lazy" or constantly criticized—can inhibit a novice teacher's growth and dampen their enthusiasm. Overall, the discussion of this theme reinforces that mentors serve not just as instructors but also as motivators [50]. A supportive mentor who celebrates improvements, provides reassurance, and expresses confidence in the mentee can strengthen that mentee's resilience and passion for teaching. Ensuring mentors adopt a motivational stance—balancing critique with encouragement—is therefore essential for a positive practicum experience.

4.5. Challenges and Areas for Improvement in Mentoring

While many mentor-mentee experiences were positive, the study also identified several areas needing improvement, notably related to communication issues, lack of guidance, and authoritarian attitudes among some mentors. These challenges, though reported by a smaller subset of participants, are important as they can significantly hinder a pre-service teacher's learning if not addressed. One common issue was poor communication or interpersonal disconnects. Some pre-service teachers felt their mentors did not communicate expectations clearly, were unapproachable for questions, or failed to provide regular feedback and dialogue. In extreme cases, mentors were described as indifferent or absent, providing minimal interaction—effectively leaving the novice teacher to "figure things out" alone. Such scenarios correspond to what Mukeredzi calls "pockets of negative practices" that can occur even when many experiences are positive [46]. Insufficient communication and guidance can render the practicum experience isolating and confusing for pre-service teachers [51]. Similarly, Chea demonstrated that when confronted with unsupportive mentors, student teachers often seek alternative sources of assistance from other school staff to meet their professional learning needs [47].

Another problematic theme was authoritarian or unconstructive mentor attitudes. Several mentor teachers

were described as excessively critical, rigid, or treating mentees as subordinate "assistants" rather than developing professionals. For example, some mentors assumed that pre-service teachers were inherently lazy or incompetent and behaved in dismissive or controlling ways—a pattern echoed in the findings of Hagenauer et al. [40]. Such mentors may either restrict pre-service teachers from engaging in substantive instructional responsibilities or, conversely, overburden them with excessive tasks while offering minimal pedagogical support, positioning the mentee as little more than a source of free labor. This finding is echoed by prior studies indicating that mentors significantly shape novice teachers' emerging professional identity by modelling what it means to be a good teacher. In contrast, studies like Kardos and Johnson show that mismatched or unsupportive mentoring—such as mentors who are unavailable, not attuned to the mentee's needs, or excessively critical—can lead to novice teachers feeling marginalized, undermining their professional identity and lowering their motivation [52]. Hobson and Malderez further identify "judgementoring"—the practice of harsh, evaluative feedback without developmental intent—as a threat to mentoring's positive effects [6]. Prabjandee similarly found that transmission-oriented mentoring approaches, characterized by rigid expectations and critical evaluations, resulted in lowered confidence and willingness to continue in the profession among student teachers [53].

5. Conclusions

The study highlights that shortcomings in mentorship can significantly impede a teacher candidate's development. In cases where mentors provided insufficient guidance, communicated poorly, or exhibited authoritarian attitudes, pre-service teachers reported frustration, lowered motivation, and missed learning opportunities [39, 40]. This finding is consistent with prior observations that preservice teachers do not always get what they hope for from their mentors, especially when mentors are unprepared for the mentoring role or carry negative preconceived notions. Such mismatches or "negative practicum experiences" can undermine the benefits of the practicum and require attention [45]. Overall, the synthesis of results suggests that while many mentoring experiences were positive and aligned with best practices, there remains a clear need to address the variability in mentor quality. By doing so, teacher preparation programs can ensure more consistent and equitable learning experiences for all student teachers. In essence, the mentor teacher's influence is profound: they can either catalyse a preservice teacher's professional growth or, if ineffective, constrain it. Thus, strengthening the preparation and support of mentor teachers emerges as a crucial step forward. The recommendations below propose actionable steps for teacher education programs and mentor training to build on these insights and improve the practicum mentoring process.

Recommendations

Considering the findings of this study, future research should examine in greater depth how mentor teachers' personal and professional characteristics influence the professional identity development of pre-service teachers. Considering that constructive feedback has positive effects while weak feedback can be detrimental, the quality of feedback processes should be assessed through longitudinal studies. Furthermore, the impact of communication gaps and authoritarian attitudes on pre-service teachers' motivation and commitment to the profession should be investigated. Finally, empirical studies are needed to test university–school collaboration models that prioritize mentor training and support mechanisms.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from the 150 (number) of participants.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest to disclose.

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