ANALYSIS

OF PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES IN AZERBAIJANI LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

ANÁLISIS DE LAS PRÁCTICAS PEDAGÓGICAS EN LA FORMACIÓN DEL PROFESORADO DE LENGUA AZERBAIYANA: PERSPECTIVAS ESTUDIANTILES

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine the views of prospective teachers on the pedagogical practice process in the teacher training process in Azerbaijan. The research was conducted with a qualitative case study design and a semi-structured interview form was used. The findings revealed that theoretical courses were based on memorization, while practical courses were inadequate. In addition, difficulties such as lack of materials in the classrooms (smart boards, projectors) and inadequate guidance from experienced teachers during the internship were noted. Prospective teachers stated that they gained didactic skills such as creating effective motivation, using interactive education methods, establishing effective communication with students and evaluation during the internship. The research emphasizes that teacher educators need a clearer knowledge base for internship training and development in this field. The results show that the gap between theory and practice in the education process in Azerbaijan should be closed and that prospective teachers should be supported more effectively in education.

Keywords: Teacher training, Pedagogical practice, Experiential learning, Development of language teaching.

RESUMEN

Esta investigación busca examinar las opiniones de los futuros docentes sobre el proceso de práctica pedagógica en el proceso de formación docente en Azerbaiyán. La investigación se realizó con un diseño de estudio de caso cualitativo y se utilizó un formato de entrevista semiestructurada. Los hallazgos revelaron que los cursos teóricos se basaban en la memorización, mientras que los cursos prácticos eran inadecuados. Además, se observaron dificultades como la falta de materiales en las aulas (pizarras digitales, proyectores) y la orientación insuficiente por parte de docentes con experiencia durante las prácticas. Los futuros docentes afirmaron haber adquirido habilidades didácticas como la motivación efectiva, el uso de métodos educativos interactivos, la comunicación efectiva con los estudiantes y la evaluación durante las prácticas. La investigación enfatiza que los formadores de docentes necesitan una base de conocimientos más sólida para la formación y el desarrollo en prácticas en este campo. Los resultados muestran que es necesario cerrar la brecha entre la teoría y la práctica en el proceso educativo en Azerbaiyán y que los futuros docentes deben recibir un apoyo más eficaz en su formación.

Palabras clave: Formación docente, Práctica pedagógica, Aprendizaje experiencial, Desarrollo de la enseñanza de idiomas.

INTRODUCTION

In countries with advanced education systems, the aim is to establish a stronger connection between the theory applied in university settings and the internship practiced in school environments during the process of training more professional teachers (Williams & Sembiante, 2022, p. 8). In contrast, teacher training programs are criticized for failing to prepare future teachers for the complexity of the profession (Ping et al., 2018, p. 95). In the research conducted, it is seen that parents prefer their children to take lessons from experienced teachers due to the inexperience of teachers who have recently graduated from university, which suggests that the experience of new teachers is not enough and the importance of realizing their experiential learning by assisting them for a while (Hilalgizi, 2014; Jafarov, 2020). In this case, the importance of pedagogical experience becomes evident in helping teacher candidates familiarize themselves with the real school environment, develop professional habits, acquire competencies, cultivate personal attributes, and gain pedagogical experience. The purpose of pedagogical practice is to provide teacher candidates with classroom experience under the supervision of professional teachers, transform learned theories into practice, create opportunities for them to identify their strengths and weaknesses in the teaching process, and eliminate their shortcomings (Aglazor, 2017, p. 112).

The professionally oriented educational environment of teacher training universities is a special resource where joint activities of educational subjects are carried out for the development of the student's personality and self-realization. In teacher education, an internship is one of the types of educational activities for higher education students, aiming primarily to develop practical skills, abilities, and professional as well as general cultural competencies in the process of performing specific tasks related to future pedagogical activities (Kozilova, 2019, p. 96). One of the important aspects of the development of teacher education is the application orientation of the education provided through the integration of educational, scientific-research and production activities. Experience is an important condition for the formation of students' professional education. The purpose of the experiential learning of the students is to prepare them for the main types of professional activities, to apply the acquired professional knowledge, skills, abilities, and professional harmony (Jirkova 2012, p. 361). Pedagogical practice is a complex process in which students carry out activities determined according to their areas of specialization. In addition to academic subjects, students' practical activities help determine the directions and perspectives of their future

professional development, strengthen their professional self-esteem, and shape the identity of future teachers and the teaching profession (Kozilova, 2019, p. 95).

Pedagogical practice contributes not only to the development of motivation for professional activities, but also to the creation of conditions for a successful psychological reconstruction of the personality. Examining the issue of highly professional training for future teachers, if this process develops as a result of the student's deep reflection and is based on the development of intrinsic self-motivation, it will be more effective, aiding in self-improvement and the acquisition of pedagogical experience. The development of the candidate teacher in the application process should be made taking into account the requirements of a modern teacher's activities and the student's desire to overcome difficulties in teaching practice, achieve positive results, and transform personal qualities. In order to develop self-organization in pedagogical practice conditions, their experiential learning should be carried out by using the student's educational portfolio as a stimulating and motivating tool.

Experiential learning programs should create space for deep experiential learning to improve students' experience towards the purpose of life. Some institutions offer experiential learning programs, such as internships, field projects, and classroom experiential learning exercises, to add a direct experiential component to traditional academic learning. These are considered educational techniques such as service learning, problem-based learning, activity-based learning, or collaborative learning (Kolb, 2014, pp. 18–20). In Azerbaijan, the experiential learning process in teacher training is carried out only after seven semesters of theoretical knowledge transfer, under the name of pedagogical internship (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2008). The aim of this research is to examine the views and preferences of teacher candidates regarding the pedagogical practice process in teacher training in Azerbaijan. In this study, the views of teacher candidates regarding pedagogical practice and experiential learning processes in teacher training within the Azerbaijani education system have been examined.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the study, a case study design, which is one of the qualitative research designs, was used. In accordance with the case study, a "semi-structured interview form" was used as the data collection tool. To create the semi-structured interview form, the relevant literature was reviewed, and semi-structured interview questions were designed based on the type of information required for each question. In creating the open-ended questions in the semi-structured

interview form, Kolb's experiential learning cycle was taken into account. The result consisted of 6 questions and the interview form was finalised at the end of this stage. Interviews were conducted in the 2022-2023 academic year by asking open-ended questions to ten teachers using a voice recorder.

The participants of the study consist of 1 male and 10 female Azerbaijani language teachers who graduated from Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University between 2019 and 2022. The information about the participants' graduation years is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' graduation year.

	Departments	Percentage
2022	8	72,73
2021	2	18,18
2019	1	9,09
TOTAL	11	100,00

Source: own elaboration.

The qualitative data obtained through the survey were transcribed using MAXQDA 12 Qualitative Data Analysis Tool and categorized into thematic categories. A face-to-face member check interview, which involved going back to the participants to validate the transcriptions and interpretations, was conducted where the participants were encouraged to make any corrections. The relevant themes were reported with their frequencies. Direct findings from the open-ended section of the survey were reported, with participants assigned numbers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiential learning

The common use of the term experiential learning describes it as a specific form of learning from life experiences, often compared to lessons and learning in the classroom (Kolb, 2014, pp. 18–21). The experiential learning theory, whose main inspiring scholars are William James, Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Carl Jung, Carl Rogers, Paulo Freire, was developed by David A. Kolb with the aim of integrating it into a systematic framework that can address the learning and education issues of the 21st century (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, pp. 193–212).

The first step in creating an experiential learning environment is to create a space that allows students to engage with the experiential learning cycle -experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting - which enables deep learning. The theory involves two different ways of gaining experience that are constantly interacting: concrete experience and abstract conceptualization. Additionally, there are two different modes for transforming the experience for learning to occur: reflective observation and active experimentation (Baker et al., 2002, pp. 65–69). Looking at Figure 1, we observe a four-stage learning cycle in the experiential learning process, where learners experience components such as concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, and further critical reflection.

Fig 1: Experiencial learning cycle.
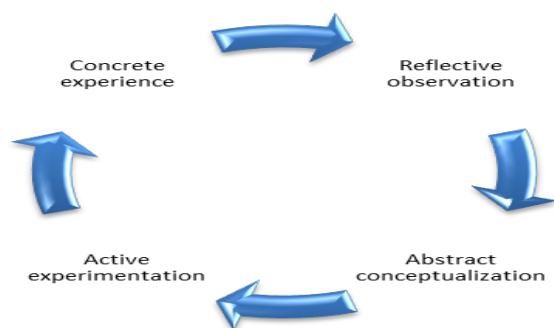
Source: own elaboration.

The most important meaning of experiential learning theory is to design educational programs in such a way that they teach around the learning cycle. Students start with a concrete experience, which leads them to observe and reflect on their experiences. After this reflective observation period, students consolidate their thoughts to form abstract concepts about what has happened, which will serve as a guide for future actions. With these guides in place, students actively test what they have constructed, leading to new experiences and the renewal of the learning cycle (Baker et al., 2002; Kolb, 2014).

**Pedagogical Internship in the Azerbaijani Education System**

In Azerbaijan, teacher education is carried out to a larger extent in Azerbaijani and Russian departments at various universities, particularly through the campuses of Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University, which are located in five different cities. For students admitted until 2019, a pedagogical internship is designed for the last one semester and for students admitted after 2019, a pedagogical internship is designed for the last two semesters to realize their experiential learning. The internship of students in their field of specialization is regulated by the "Regulation on Internship for Students of Higher (Secondary) Educational Institutions", approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan with Decision No. 221 dated September 19, 2008. The main objectives of this practice are to ensure that students apply the theoretical knowledge they acquire in their professional activities, to instill communication skills, to develop the ability to use new teaching methods and technologies, and to reinforce knowledge in computer technology. In Azerbaijan, the responsibilities of higher education institutions providing pedagogical education and the production facility where pedagogical practice is conducted in the process of organizing pedagogical practice (internship) are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Responsibilities of the organizing process of pedagogical practice.

Responsibilities of higher education institutions providing teacher education in Azerbaijan in organizing pedagogical practice	Responsibilities of the production facility where pedagogical practice is carried out in Azerbaijan in organizing pedagogical practice
Concluding a contract with the educational institution where the pedagogical internship will take place and agreeing on the internship program and schedule	Ensuring the organization and execution of the internship
Appointing a practice leader	Appointing an internship supervisor from among experienced staff
Providing the necessary software to the internship institution and interns	Assigning specific locations (classrooms) for students to conduct their practical training
Supervising the implementation and content of the internship	Ensuring that interns have access to books, computers, visual aids, and educational tools
Ensuring that intern students undergo medical examinations if necessary	Being responsible for the safety of students at the institution during the internship

Source: own elaboration.

The teaching workload of the supervisors appointed by the educational institution where the students in the application are educated and the production facility in the application is 56 hours per student and these hours are shared among supervisors as shown in Figure 2.

Fig 2. Teaching Workload of Internship Supervisors Appointed by Educational Institutions in Azerbaijan.
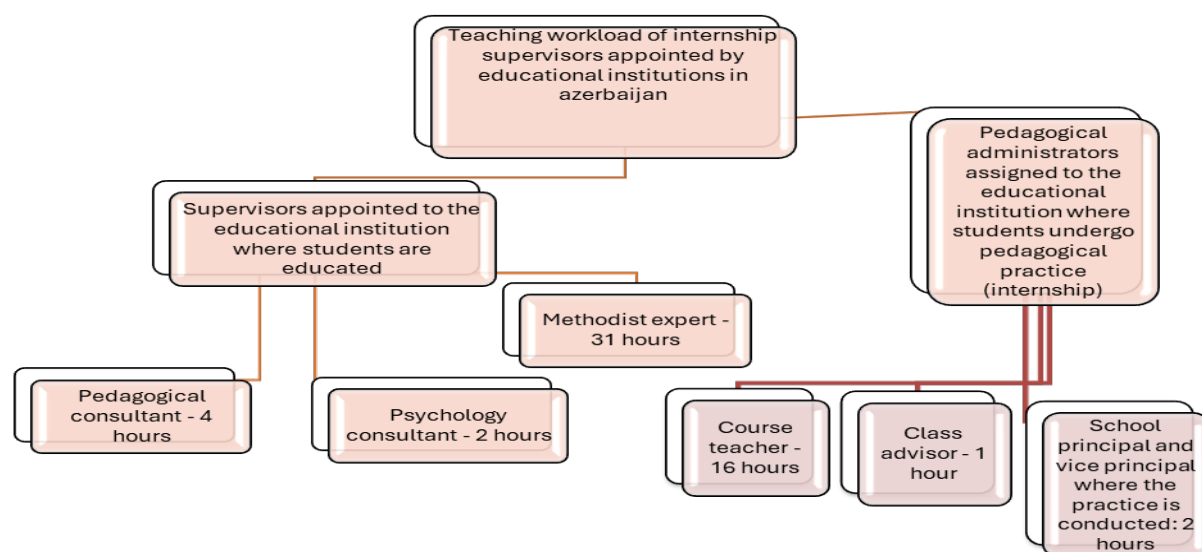
Source: own elaboration.

During the pedagogical experience, teacher candidates demonstrate their ability to organize the teaching process, write reports by identifying and analyzing students' pedagogical and psychological characteristics, organize school activities, and conduct pedagogical and educational talks. Methodologists and advisors observe these activities and evaluate them at the end of the pedagogical practice.

When we look at the literature, research has been conducted on topics such as what teacher educators teach and how they teach (Ping et al., 2018, pp. 93–104), the development of the internship plan (Ellis & Childs, 2019, p. 277), the impact of issues encountered by teacher candidates during their teaching experiences in schools on their career intentions (Huu & Tai, 2019, p. 160), the role of mentor teachers as school-based teacher educators (Rakes et al., 2023, p. 74), the professional development of teachers (Wang et al., 2021, p. 71), and the evaluation of the quality of teacher candidate education (Şahin & Sezgin, 2021, p. 777; Zengin & Coban, 2020, pp. 147–149). However, there has been little research on evaluating the quality of teacher candidates' experiential learning process from their own perspectives. In the context of teacher education in Azerbaijan, no research has been conducted in this area; therefore, this study was carried out to fill this research gap.

In the literature review, 75 articles on what, how and why teacher educators learn were evaluated and it was found that teacher educators do not have a clear knowledge base to support their work, participate in different learning activities and need to learn to do their job (Ping et al., 2018, p. 95). In a study conducted at Oxford University from 1973 to 1987 on the development of a teacher education internship plan, it was concluded that frequent interaction between academics and teacher candidates led to advancements in the field of internship training (Ellis & Childs, 2019, p. 277). In another study, it was concluded that teacher educators taught lessons in a way that was unrelated to what was happening in practice (Friesen, 2023, p. 90), and did not effectively guide the learning of teacher candidates (Phillips & Condy, 2023, pp. 201–217).

The effect of the problems encountered by teacher candidates in Vietnam during their teaching experiences in schools on their career intentions has been investigated. Despite the challenges, the qualitative content analysis of the interview showed that teacher candidates gradually gained positive experiences in using pedagogical knowledge and skills, working with stakeholders, and solving context-related issues. The study concluded that it is important for university advisors and internship supervisors to work more closely together and to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the advisors (Huu & Tai, 2019, p. 160). A longitudinal study on the role of mentor teachers as school-based teacher educators concluded that school-based teacher educators identified themselves in roles such as hosts, career guides, educational consultants, and teacher partners (Rakes et al., 2023, p. 74). Research on the professional development of Chinese

teachers revealed the impact of experiential learning on participants' deeper understanding of foreign experiences (Wang et al., 2021).

In the research evaluating the quality of pre-service teacher education in Turkey, it was concluded that there is a gap between theory and practice (ahin & Sezgin, 2021, p. 777), that practical training should start earlier, that there is a lack of materials, and that the quality of pre-service education is low due to overcrowded classrooms (Zengin & Coban, 2020, p. 147).

Main findings from the interviews

This section includes the opinions of teachers who received teacher training at Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University between 2019-2022 regarding the pedagogical practice process. As a result of the research, the extent to which the relationship between theory and practice is established, how effective the practice is in training experienced teachers, and the opinions of teachers about the necessary improvements have been investigated. From 171 statements of the teachers, 2 themes, 5 categories according to these themes and 34 codes appropriate to the categories were extracted. The teachers' views on the pedagogical internship process, categorized under the themes "connection between theory and practice" and "required developments", are presented in Figure 3, along with the categories related to these themes.

Fig 3. Themes and categories analyzed.
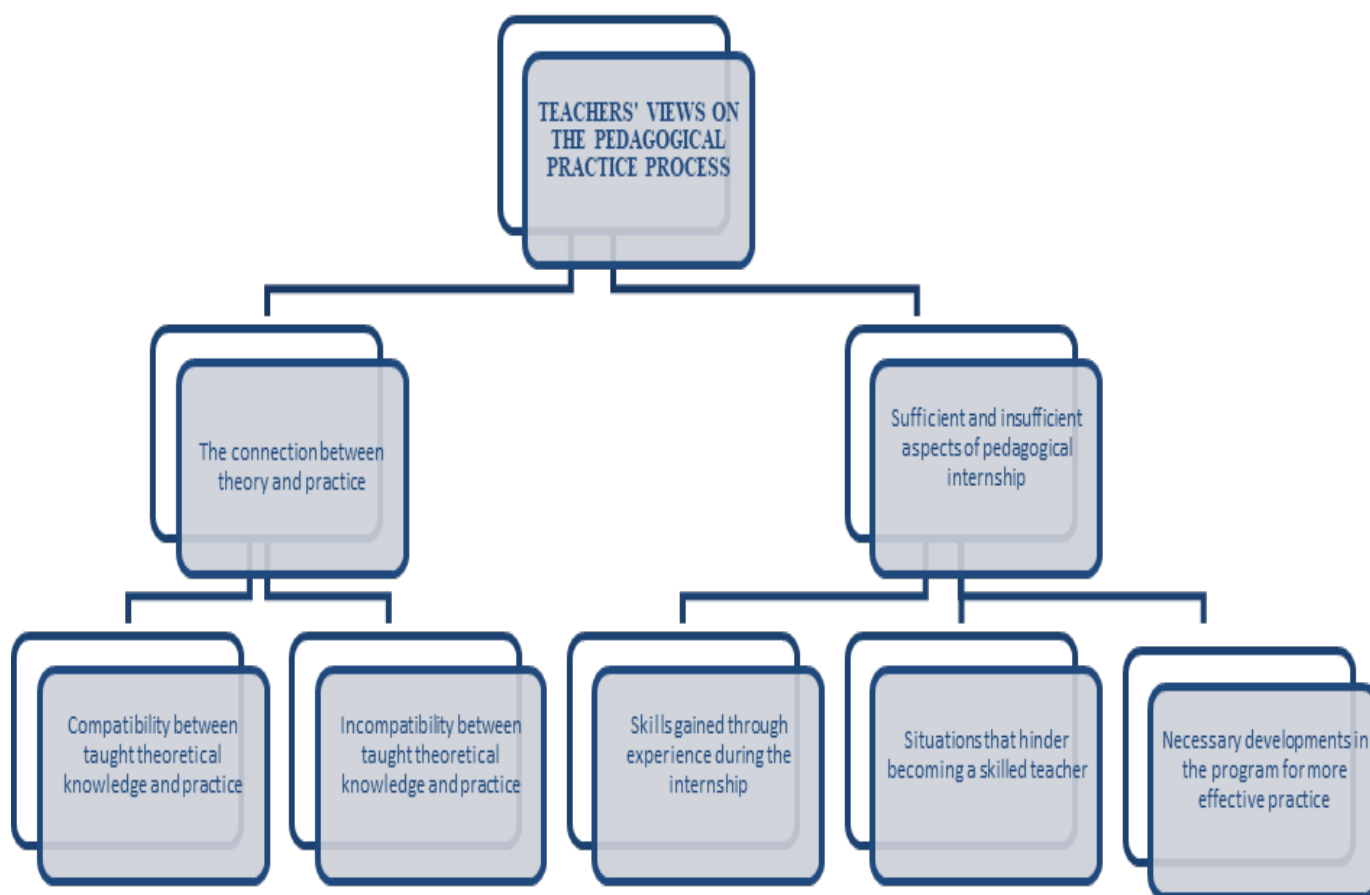
Source: own elaboration.

The theme of "connection between theory and practice" in teachers' views on the pedagogical internship process consists of two categories

Teachers' views on the "connection between theory and practice" theme of pedagogical practice process.

Under this heading, the views of the teachers educated at Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University on the theme of "the connection between theory and practice" of the pedagogical practice process are given. According to the purpose of the research, open-ended questions were asked to teacher candidates who completed their internship about the characteristics of the connection between theory and practice in the education process, based on their answers and views, the findings consist of 2 categories and 12 codes, which are presented below. The frequencies and percentages of the 4 codes related to the category of compatibility between taught theoretical knowledge and practice are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The frequencies and percentages related to the category of compatibility between taught theoretical knowledge and practice.

	Frequency	Percentage
The rules for writing a daily lesson plan	8	28,57
Evaluation of student achievement	4	14,29
Designing according to the stages of the lesson	10	35,71
Lesson planning	6	21,43
TOTAL	28	100,00

Source: own elaboration.

When examining Figure 2, it can be observed that 28 statements related to the compatibility between the taught theoretical knowledge and practice were identified by the teachers. It can be observed that the majority of these statements, specifically 35.71% (10 statements), are related to the code "designing according to the stages of the lesson". The statements of some teachers about the category of adaptability between the theoretical information taught in the research and the practical one is given below.

T2: "We used the information about the stages of the course we took in the theoretical courses, the planning of the course, the arrangement of the curriculum during the internship".

T6: "Teaching pedagogical knowledge helped us a lot. We carried out the lesson planning by writing, designing according to the stages of the lesson, evaluating the student information based on the theoretical information we learned in the lessons".

The frequencies and percentages for the 4 codes related to the category of incompatibility between the taught theoretical knowledge and practice are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequencies and percentages for the category of incompatibility between the taught theoretical knowledge and practice are as follows.

	Frequency	Percentage
Teaching of courses in the internship classes using the traditional method	11	42,31
The differences between university and school teaching requirements	5	19,23
Learning to teach with a technical tool in theory and not applying it in practice	3	11,54
Our courses equip us theoretically more than practically	2	7,69
The educational-technical infrastructure of the schools is not suitable for the exam courses	2	7,69
The number of students in the class	2	7,69
Failure to provide information about the organization of classroom activities	1	3,85
TOTAL	26	100,00

Source: own elaboration.

42% of the statements indicate that "courses are given by the traditional method in the internship classes," which is inappropriate considering the theoretical information provided. The teacher opinions regarding the codes related to the category of incompatibility between the taught theoretical knowledge and practice are as follows:

T7: The biggest inconsistency was the use of traditional teaching methods in the classrooms where the internships were conducted. Of course, it is not correct to apply this to all schools. However, the teachers whose classes we attended taught using traditional methods, and due to the university requesting new methods for teaching, we were struggling to create our exam courses.

T9: Not applying what we learned theoretically about teaching with technical tools in practice prevented us from gaining excellent experience.

Teachers' views on the theme of "adequate and inadequate aspects of pedagogical practice" of pedagogical practice process.

In the study, open-ended questions were asked to teacher candidates who had completed their internship process to determine the sufficient and insufficient aspects of pedagogical practice in the education process. The results, consisting of three categories and 23 codes based on their answers and opinions, are presented below. The expressions containing the frequencies and percentages of the statements regarding the category of "situations that prevent training as an experienced teacher" under the theme of "adequate and inadequate aspects of pedagogical practice" of the pedagogical practice process are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Frequency and percentages of statements about the category of situations that prevent being trained as an experienced teacher.

	Frequency	Percentage
Theoretical courses are based on rote learning rather than experience	8	25,00
Lack of smart boards in the classrooms where the internship is carried out	6	18,75
Lack of pojection device in the classrooms where the internship is carried out	5	15,63
More hours are allocated to theoretical courses than practical courses	5	15,63
Teaching courses that have nothing to do with teacher education	3	9,38
High number of written assignments	3	9,38
Traditional methods of delivering the lessons we listen to	2	6,25
TOTAL	32	100,0

Source: own elaboration.

As seen in Table 5, "theoretical courses being based on memorization rather than experience" has been identified as the most significant barrier to supervised teacher training, with a frequency of 8. Additionally, the lack of smart boards and projectors in internship classrooms, the higher number of theoretical course hours compared to practical ones, the inclusion of courses unrelated to teacher education, the excessive number of written assignments, and the use of traditional methods in observed lessons have been identified as factors hindering teacher candidates from gaining experience.

Some statements from the participants regarding the category of factors hindering their training as experienced teachers are provided below.

T1: The biggest non-conformity I noticed during the internship and teacher recruitment exam period was the delivery of courses that had nothing to do with teacher training. I would like to point out that some topics are covered in excessive depth, while others are generally not necessary for becoming an experienced teacher.

T6: The biggest obstacle is related to the courses. Some topics need to be added, while others should be modified. The fact that theoretical courses are based on memorization rather than experience makes the internship process challenging for us.

The frequency and percentage results of the 11 codes under the category of "Skills acquired through experience during internship" are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Frequency and percentage results of the category of skills acquired through experience during the internship.

	Frequency	Percentage
Creating effective motivation at the beginning of the lesson	6	17,14
Conducting the educational process with interactive methods	5	14,29
Teaching with educational methods that make lessons more understandable	4	11,43
Development of communication skills with students	4	11,43
Creating a student-centered learning environment	3	8,57
Identification of students who need an individual approach	3	8,57
Creation of didactic games that will attract the interest of students	2	5,71
Evaluation of student performance	2	5,71
Dividing the stages of the lesson during the course process without looking at the time	2	5,71
Ensuring the activity of children who participate passively in the lesson	2	5,71
Preparation of visual resources that will make the course effective	2	5,71
TOTAL	35	100,00

Source: own elaboration.

When the table is examined, 35 statements about the category of "skills gained through experience during the internship" are indicated. Among these, 17.14% corresponds to the code "creating effective motivation at the beginning of the lesson" with a frequency of 6. This code is closely followed by the codes "conducting the educational process with interactive methods," "teaching with educational methods that make the lessons more understandable," and "developing communication skills with students." The teachers' opinions related to the topic are provided below.

T3: The most important skill I gained during the internship was learning how to ensure the engagement of students who participate passively in the lesson and the importance of dedicating special time for this.

T9: Before the internship, communicating with children was difficult for me. During the internship, I developed my ability to communicate with children more easily than I had expected.

T11: I learned during the internship the importance of preparing visual resources that will make the lesson more effective and being very careful in selecting them. I realized how much the correct choice of resources can influence the outcome of the lesson.

The results of the category "Developments needed in the program for more efficient practice," consisting of 28 codes, are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Frequencies and percentages of the category of improvements required in the program to make the practice more efficient.

	Frequency	Percentage
Frequencies and percentages of the category of improvements required in the program to make the practice more efficient.	7	25,00
Implementation of the internship process in the classrooms of innovative teachers	7	25,00
Development of written assignments given during the internship process	6	21,43
Allocating the same amount of lesson hours to practical and theoretical processes	5	17,86
To create school management skills in addition to teaching	3	10,71
TOTAL	28	100,00

Source: own elaboration.

The majority of the participants indicated that the developments needed for more efficient practice include «allocating course hours focused on application in every academic year» and «implementing the internship process in classrooms of innovative teachers.»

Teacher opinions about categories and codes are given below.

T2: In order for teacher candidates to work as administrators (principals) in educational institutions in the future, they should be given the opportunity to gain experience in management in addition to teaching. In other words, for example, having a conversation with the principal.

T5: A 3-month internship creates adjustment issues for students. I believe there is a need to allocate course hours focused on application in every academic year.

T7: I believe that in order to achieve a more productive outcome, it is necessary to implement the internship process in the classrooms of innovative teachers. I believe that teacher candidates should be given the opportunity to choose their subject teacher.

CONCLUSIONS

During the pedagogical internship period, teacher candidates benefited from the theoretical knowledge they acquired, including the rules for writing daily lesson plans, evaluating student achievements, designing lessons according to stages, and lesson planning information. The teachers' expressed opinions, such as lessons being delivered using traditional methods in the internship classrooms, the differences between university and school teaching requirements, learning to teach with technical tools theoretically but not applying them in practice, lessons equipping them more theoretically than practically, and the schools' education-technical infrastructure not being suitable for exam-based courses, reflect the disconnect between theory and practice. Providing teacher educators with training that is disconnected from what happens in practice and not effectively guiding the learning of teacher candidates is a fundamental issue in teacher education. Additionally, theory needs to be structured in a way that makes practice more conscious and purposeful.

Another finding of the research is that the theoretical courses being based on memorization, the lack of smart boards and projectors in classrooms, the higher number of theoretical courses compared to practical ones, the inclusion of courses unrelated to teacher education, the excessive number of written assignments, and the use of traditional methods in the lessons observed by teacher candidates are all factors that hinder the development of experienced teachers during the internship. It has been

concluded that university advisors and school teachers in Vietnam should work more closely together, and it is important for the advisors to clarify their roles and responsibilities, leading to the same conclusion. In teacher education we continuously face issues such as the gap between theory and practice in pre-service teacher training, the necessity of starting practical training earlier, the lack of materials, and the low quality of pre-service education. Therefore, teacher educators need a well-structured knowledge base for internship training and the development required in this area. In addition, other important aspects that teacher candidates must learn during their internship include skills such as creating effective motivation at the beginning of the lesson, conducting the educational process with interactive methods, communicating with students, conducting assessments, and organizing educational games.

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