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EXPLORING THE TEACHING PRACTICUM: INSIGHTS FROM MENTORS AND PRE-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS

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Abstract. *This study explores the teaching practicum (TP) at the Niš English Department during 2022/23 by examining the perspectives of both teaching mentors (TM) and pre-service teachers (PSTs). To understand their experiences, a set of two questionnaires partly based on Hudson's model of mentoring for effective teaching (2004) was compiled: one for TMs, and the other for PSTs, one largely reflecting the other. The study employed a qualitative analysis to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the TP as perceived by the two groups. It investigated several key areas, including TMs' role in providing support to PSTs, modeling teaching practices, and fostering relationships, PSTs' preparedness for the TP as well as TMs' insights into the benefits and challenges of mentoring. The results showed that TMs provided both cognitive and affective support, with PSTs valuing affective support more. PSTs generally described their relationship with TMs as supportive. Additionally, the results highlighted that while TMs were concerned with being a good model to PSTs, exhibiting enthusiasm and introducing a variety of activities, PSTs were unaware of those; they were mostly focused on their own confidence and personal performance.*

Key words: *TEFL Methodology, teaching practicum, teaching mentors, pre-service teachers, effective mentoring, teaching practice*

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching practicum (TP) has become an important component of the initial teacher education (ITE) worldwide. It represents a complex segment of ITE, the success of which depends on connecting pre-service teachers' (PSTs') theoretical knowledge gained at university with practical teaching in classroom settings. It allows PSTs to apply teaching methods and principles, instructional techniques, and classroom management strategies in a real classroom environment, providing invaluable hands-on experience. The crucial part

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of the TP is mentoring, which involves experienced teachers - teaching mentors (TMs) - working closely with PSTs and supporting their professional growth. The success of the TP depends on the collaboration of university instructors, TMs and PSTs, with TMs doing the greatest part of the work (Ambrosetti 2014). This collaboration is essential for providing a comprehensive learning experience for PSTs.

Different aspects of the TP have been subject of research: from the selection and preparation of TMs (Ambrosetti 2014; Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko 2014), through the roles of TMs and PSTs (Ambrosetti and Dekkers 2010; Hall et al. 2008) and their mutual relationship (Hudson 2013; Izadinia 2015a), to the factors influencing the effectiveness of the mentoring process (Albakri et al. 2021; Hairon et al. 2020) and the development of PSTs' professional identity (Izadinia 2015b). While the TP has been studied from the perspectives of both TMs and PSTs, "more research is needed to explore the ideas, values, expectations and understanding of mentors and mentees" (Izadinia 2015a, 2). Examining both perspectives provides a comprehensive view of the TP experience. It can help identify the strengths of the TP, as well as reveal underlying challenges and issues that may not be apparent from a single point of view. The present study, therefore, investigates several aspects of the TP from the perspectives of both TMs and PSTs at the Niš English Department in Serbia with the aim of identifying similarities and differences between their perceptions. By understanding the needs, challenges, and successes from both sides, TMs, course instructors and educators in general can improve mentoring approaches and practices, and ensure the development of motivated and competent teachers. Bearing in mind that the TP can have a different place in the ITE in different countries and that it can be structured and organized in different ways, it is worth investigating how the TP is conducted under the characteristics of a local context not previously investigated and if and how that impacts the attitudes and behavior of the main participants – PSTs and TMs.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. PST mentoring

The mentoring process during the TP "constitutes a critical factor in [PSTs'] professional development" (Leshem 2012, 413). It has been "promoted as a meaningful way for neophytes to begin to learn about their profession as it provides pre-service teachers with the required basic skills and professional knowledge to face the uncertainty associated with the complexity of practice" (Mena, Hennissen, and Loughran 2017, 48). The goal of mentoring is to support the professional development of PSTs, helping them navigate the challenges of teaching and improve their teaching skills.

As Ambrosetti and Dekkers note, TMs "consider their role to be mainly one of providing support for mentees" (2010, 47). Abdullah et al. (2020) list different types of support TMs provide to PSTs. *Cognitive support* refers to the help TMs provide "in the acquisition of new knowledge or the expansion of existing knowledge" (Abdullah et al. 2020, 341). It encompasses guidance that directly relates to the skills and knowledge necessary for effective teaching, such as assistance with lesson planning, classroom management, time management, teaching resources, modeling effective teaching practices, etc. By providing concrete examples and explanations, TMs can help PSTs bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

TMs further provide *affective support* in the form of encouragement, motivation, empathy and a positive attitude, which is crucial to creating a "conducive learning environment that ultimately would optimize [PSTs'] learning progress" (Abdullah et al. 2020, 343). Similarly, other studies have found that effective TM support should also include emotional support (Israel et al. 2014; Popescu-Mitroi and Mazilescu 2014). Affective support contributes to an environment where PSTs feel safe to express their thoughts and ask questions, which makes them feel more confident in their abilities.

Finally, *social support* involves TMs establishing rapport with PSTs (Abdullah et al. 2020, 344). It focuses on creating a welcoming environment for PSTs and building a trust-based relationship. Literature further shows that this relationship should be both professional and personal, open, based on mutual trust and respect (Ambrosetti 2014; Ambrosetti and Dekkers 2010; Ellis, Alonzo, and Nguyen 2020; Hudson 2013; Hudson and Millwater 2008; Izadinia 2015a). It is often emphasized that the TM and the PST will benefit if the relationship is non-hierarchical, dialogic in nature with both parties participating in "a reciprocal exchange of ideas and joint construction of knowledge" (Ellis, Alonzo, and Nguyen 2020, 3). Building and sustaining such a relationship depends on the positive attributes and attitudes of both parties; however, due to their different social roles respectively, it is the TM who "need[s] to be proactive in facilitating the relationship" (Hudson 2013, 8) and create "a setting that will foster and nurture a collegial relationship" (Ellis, Alonzo, and Nguyen 2020, 5). As a result, the PST will develop more confidence and will feel empowered to get out of their comfort zone, try new teaching strategies and activities, deal with challenges, thus maximizing their professional development. Conversely, if the TM and PST do not build a good relationship, there can be little if any progress in developing the PST's professional identity. Therefore, it is important for educators and ITE providers to collect information on how the two parties perceive their mutual relationship.

Based on everything above, it can be concluded that being a TM is a complex and challenging role. Yet, there are always teachers who are prepared to accept the position. When asked why, some TMs report they find benefits in their own professional development, renewed reflection on their own teaching and enthusiasm for the job, while others want to contribute to the profession and help younger colleagues (Ambrosetti 2014; Jewell 2007; Li, Sani, and Azmin 2021; Walkington 2005). At the same time, TMs are aware of the challenges, such as: additional workload, more responsibilities and stress, insufficient support from the school and/or university (Ambrosetti 2014; Walkington 2005). However, the benefits seem to outweigh the challenges.

2.2. Hudson's mentoring model

The present study partly relied on the mentoring model developed by Hudson (2004), which includes five main factors that can guide effective mentoring. First of all, in order to build a strong relationship with PSTs, TMs need to exhibit *personal attributes* such as being "encouraging, affable, attentive and supportive" (Hudson 2004, 142). The second factor relates to TMs' knowledge of key *education system requirements*. TMs should guide PSTs on issues such as curriculum standards, school policies, professional conduct, etc. Thirdly, "the mentor's *pedagogical knowledge* is a key reason for providing field experiences [...] within preservice teacher education programs" (Hudson 2004, 142). This includes expertise in lesson planning, classroom management, teaching strategies, assessment methods, and subject knowledge. The next factor emphasizes the importance of TMs *modeling effective*

teaching practices. It involves demonstrating PSTs how to conduct lessons, manage classrooms, engage students and build rapport with them. Finally, TMs need to provide constructive and timely *feedback* to PSTs. They should observe PSTs' lessons and review their lesson plans, as well as provide encouragement and positive reinforcement, as this can "contribute to instilling confidence in the mentee" (Hudson 2004, 143). The model outlined here has been used in many studies exploring mentoring practices (see, for instance, Albakri et al 2021; Haas, Hudson, and Hudson 2022; Vásquez Carrosa, Rosas-Maldonado, and Martin 2019) and it served as a useful framework in designing the survey and analyzing aspects of the TP in the present study.

3. PRESENT STUDY

3.1. Aim

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore, analyze and compare TMs' and PSTs' perspectives on the TP at the Niš English Department in 2022/23, with the aim of identifying similarities and differences between the two groups' responses. The research questions addressed in the study were:

1. How do the two groups – TMs and PSTs – view the TP?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the views of the two cohorts?

The qualitative analysis of the gathered data aimed to obtain a holistic comprehension of the TP, as perceived by both TMs and PSTs. By analyzing the participants' insights, the study aimed to contribute to the existing knowledge on TP experiences and inform future improvements in ITE programs, particularly bearing in mind the characteristics of the local context and the position, structure and organization of the TP in it.

3.2. Research context

At the English Department in Niš, Serbia, there is a clear division between two TEFL Methodology courses. The first one is a preparatory, theoretical course, which involves extensive reading on different teaching methods and approaches, as well as limited practical work, mainly the basics of lesson planning, lesson observation, and peer microteaching. The second course focuses on the TP conducted in schools in Niš, where students spend about three months.

Education in Serbia at the elementary level is compulsory and covers grades 1 through 8. The age range for students typically spans from 7 to 14. After completing elementary schools, students can enter grammar schools or vocational high schools, which typically have a duration of 4 years. Grammar schools provide a general secondary education (including General English courses) and their graduates often continue their education at university. Vocational high schools, on the other hand, offer specialized education and training in specific professions, and they typically include General English and ESP instruction. PSTs can decide whether they would teach both segments or only General English.

The TEFL Methodology course instructors try to accommodate PSTs' preferences by allowing them to choose where they want to complete their TP whenever possible, whether it be in an elementary, grammar or vocational high school. PSTs are hosted by TMs, who are not assigned by any educational body but are volunteers closely cooperating with university instructors.

During their TP, PSTs work in groups of three or four students. Their tasks include observing their TM's lessons, observing their group members' lessons as well as teaching in pairs and individually. During the TP, PSTs keep a portfolio, which documents their professional development. It consists of TM and peer observation lists, lesson plans for the lessons they conduct as well as the materials they use, and reflection sheets where they can analyze and evaluate the experience they gained during the TP (Lazarević 2018). The final exam consists of a 45 min lesson held by one group member, observed by the other group members, and a follow-up discussion about the lesson and the TP with the whole group. The final exam is assessed by the TEFL Methodology course instructors, which is crucial for the relationship between TMs and PSTs because it provides a greater opportunity for open and honest communication between them. Removing the role of the assessor contributes to creating a supportive environment, where TMs can focus on overseeing each PST's individual professional development, monitoring them, and providing feedback and guidance (Ambrosetti 2014).

3.3. Participants

The study comprised two groups of participants: 20 TMs and 36 PSTs from a total of 23 TMs and 77 PSTs who took part in the TP in Niš schools in the spring of 2023, which means that the response rate for TMs (87%) was higher than for PSTs (47%). The participants completed the questionnaires in October 2023.

TMs were teachers of English working in elementary, grammar and vocational high schools in Niš, Serbia. The majority of them reported extensive professional experience, with 95% of them working as teachers over 10 years. Over half of TMs had more than 10 years of mentoring experience (see Table 1). All TMs had an MA in English and most of them attended mentoring courses held by the English Department instructors in the late 1990s and 2017. Each participant in this group was coded as TM01, TM02, TM03, etc.

Table 1 Overview of TMs' experience

	How many years of work experience do you have?		How long have you been a mentor?	
0-5 years	0%	0	45%	9
6-10 years	5%	1	25%	5
11-20 years	55%	11	25%	5
21-30 years	35%	7	5%	1
over 30 years	5%	1	0%	0
Total	100%	20	100%	20

PSTs participating in the study were third-year students of the English Department at the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš. The majority of them completed the TP in elementary schools, making up over 70% of the group. Each participant in this group was coded as PTS01, PTS02, PTS03, etc.

3.4. Instrument and procedure

In order to obtain a holistic comprehension of the TP as perceived by TMs and PSTs, a set of two questionnaires was compiled: one for TMs, and the other for PSTs, one largely

reflecting the other. The questionnaires were in part guided by Hudson's model of mentoring for effective teaching (2004) with some adaptations to suit the local context. This model was chosen because it offers a comprehensive understanding of the mentoring process with five clearly defined factors. The adaptations to the local context were necessary due to the specific structure and organization of the TP within the ITE at the Niš English Department, which include: the (lack of) an educational body that sets standards for and oversees appointing the mentoring position to a teacher, the status of the TP within the ITE program, the scope and duration of the TP, to name but a few.

Each questionnaire contained questions referring to different aspects of mentoring and the TP aiming to elicit views of PSTs and TMs. Due to space constraints, this paper will provide a brief overview of only the most significant ones: TMs' support, modeling of teaching practice, the relationship between TMs and PSTs, aspects of teaching that PSTs were well-prepared for, and some benefits and challenges of being a TM. Each aspect was covered with two or three questions. The first one was a multi-select multiple-choice question followed by a ranking or an open-ended question which allowed the participants to provide clarification or feedback on the issue investigated by the multi-select question.

The questionnaires were distributed in the form of online Google forms.[1] Given that some students who participated in the study were still taking courses with the researchers, it was crucial to make it clear that participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous.

Once all the data were gathered, they were analyzed qualitatively. An in-depth content analysis involved investigating and comparing the answers of the two groups in order to identify similarities and differences. Quantitative data, which involved responses to multiselect questions, were organized using Google Forms. All extracts provided in the following section are original in terms of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. TM support

The first multi-select question referred to the support and guidance TMs provided to PSTs in their professional development during the TP. TMs were asked to select all the answers that applied to them, and they could also add other types of support not present on the list if they considered it necessary. PSTs were asked to select the types of support they believed their TM provided to them. Figure 1 shows the participants' answers. In a follow-up question, they were then asked to select the three types of support they considered to be the most important and elaborate on their answer if possible.

According to the participants' answers, TMs provided cognitive support in the form of feedback, which is one of the main tasks of a TM. Hudson considers feedback to be crucial to the mentoring process, as it "allows mentors to articulate, in a constructive manner, expert opinions on the mentee's development towards becoming a teacher" (2004, 143). "A quality mentor should provide the PST with regular, timely, critical and actionable feedback which relates to practice" (Ellis, Alonzo and Nguyen 2020, 8). Constructive feedback from TMs helps PSTs identify areas for improvement, it guides their development as teachers, and it prompts them to reflect on their practice and critically evaluate their teaching methods.

[1] The questionnaires are available upon request at ema.zivkovic.nikolic@filfak.ni.ac.rs.

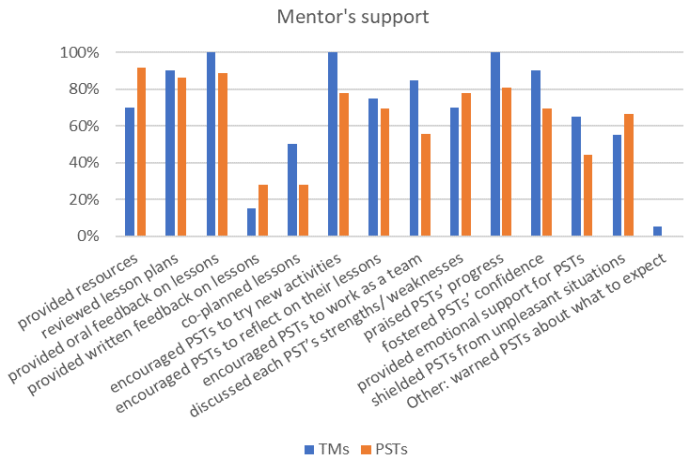

Fig. 1 The participants' answers regarding TM' support and guidance during the TP

Based on the participants' answers, it seems that TMs valued providing oral feedback on PSTs' lessons highly as most PSTs and all the TMs report they included it in their practice. Furthermore, both groups of participants chose this type of support as the most important. As PST08 highlighted, *the feedback that we got after we had our class was very useful, the mentor would say what could be enhanced, why something should be done more differently and eventually what is on paper is one thing and what happens in reality is something else. That is why we were encouraged to adapt to the class rather than stick to the plan.* The same feeling was shared by PST02, who said *it was important for us to get feedback from our mentor after every class so we know how to better ourselfs and which thing needed to be worked on.*

Feedback was also given in the form of reviewing PSTs' lesson plans. The data show that both groups of participants agree that most TMs reviewed PSTs' lesson plans, although the answers to the follow-up question regarding the most important types of support showed that PSTs placed higher importance on this type of support than TMs did, especially when it comes to areas PSTs were not confident about or felt needed improvement. As PST08 noted, *when it comes to feedback to our lesson plans, it was very important for us because we were not sure whether the plans were suitable for particular classes. We had an elementary school, very young students and we were not used to writing lesson plans for that young students.* PSTs repeatedly emphasized they appreciated the feedback because their TMs recognized their strengths and provided guidance for improvement: *We are extremely thankful that our mentors took their time to review our lesson plans and to give us feedback regarding the activities they would modify or replace* (PST28).

Apart from providing cognitive support such as giving feedback, reviewing lesson plans and sharing resources, the data further suggest that TMs provided affective support in the form of praise, motivation and encouragement. Figure 1 shows that both groups agree TMs praised PSTs' progress during the TP. However, the participants' answers to the follow-up question indicate that PSTs, unlike TMs, consider this type of support to be essential to their professional growth. Recognition of PSTs' progress can contribute to instilling confidence in PSTs and building self-assurance in their teaching abilities. It encourages them to continue putting in the effort to improve. As PST26 notes, *it was important for our*

mentor to praise our progress throughout our practicum because it motivated us to try to be even better and we felt proud of ourselfs.

Figure 1 also shows that both groups agree that TMs encouraged PSTs to try new activities in their lessons. This time, however, TMs considered this type of support as crucial, while PSTs did not recognize it as such. These results are further corroborated by TMs' reports about PSTs shying away from incorporating new activities in their lessons. This is understandable, given that using familiar activities can provide a sense of comfort for inexperienced PSTs, while novel activities can be perceived as challenging. TMs tried to explain, though, that introducing *NEW activities and techniques will keep the lesson lively and interesting; it keeps minds alert and enthusiasm high* (TM17). Some TMs further encouraged exploring new activities and exposure to diverse teaching methods in order *to emphasize that learning doesn't stop after getting a degree but is a long-life process* (TM07).

4.2. TM/PST relationship

Another question focused on TMs providing PSTs with social support. The question centered on the nature of the relationship between PSTs and their mentors. Since it is generally agreed in literature that it is the TM, as the participant with higher power in the relationship, who is responsible for building and nurturing the relationship with the PST (Ellis, Alonzo and Nguyen 2020; Izadinia 2015), this question was posed only to PSTs: we wanted to investigate the perceptions of those with less power in the relationship. As seen in Figure 2, PSTs were offered a range of descriptors to evaluate the relationship: from negative ('lack of understanding', 'lack of communication', 'ineffective', etc.) through 'neutral' to positive ones ('empowering', 'relaxed', 'friendly', etc.).

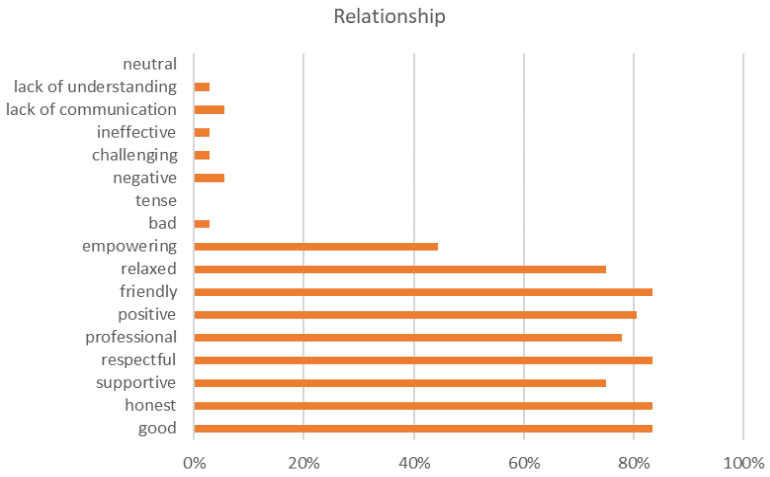

Fig. 2 PSTs' answers regarding their relationship with TMs

Almost all PSTs described their relationship with TMs in positive terms, using the descriptors: 'good', 'honest', 'respectful' and 'friendly' most frequently. It is evident that TMs managed to establish a positive relationship with PSTs and provide a welcoming environment during the TP. This is an important (and for PSTs' university instructors, a satisfying) finding because "a relationship built on trust and openness ensure[s] that the

PST's developmental needs [will] be met" (Ambrosetti 2014, 38). Only two respondents (PST19 and PST25) described their relationship with the TMs in negative terms ('lack of understanding', 'ineffective', 'negative'). From their answers to other questions about the communication and cooperation with their TMs, it can be inferred that their TMs provided them with extremely limited professional support and guidance and that these PSTs felt this had hindered their professional development. Though these PSTs' answers diverged from the answers of the other PSTs in this area, their answers regarding other areas (e.g., characteristics of students doing the TP, preparedness for the TP) were not much different. Although the number of such PSTs is small, the university instructors should investigate the issue further in order to avoid similar situations in the future.

4.3. Modeling of teaching practices

The next question referred to the areas that TMs paid special attention to when modeling their lessons observed by PSTs and areas PSTs observed in their TMs' lessons. The results are shown in Figure 3. The participants were again asked a follow-up open-ended question related to whether any discussions took place after the lessons to help PSTs analyze and reflect on the observed lessons.

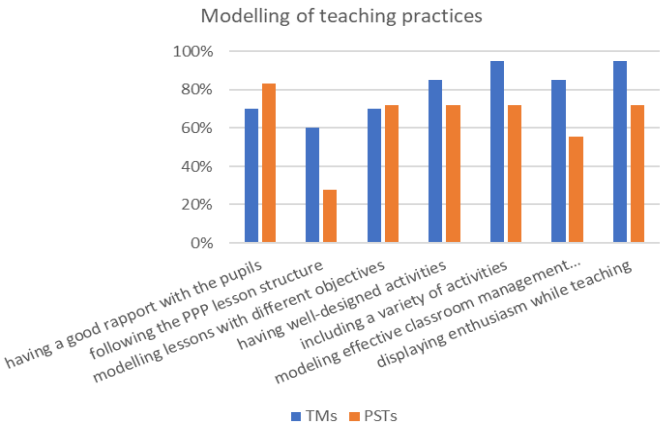

Fig. 3 The participants' answers regarding TMs' modeling of teaching practices

According to Hudson (2004), modeling is a central aspect of mentorship. It allows PSTs to bridge the gap between theory and practice since by observing TMs' lessons they learn how to apply theoretical knowledge in real classroom settings. As Albakri et al. (2021) note, "it is important that the mentor models effective instructional practices as tangible evidence for the pre-service teachers to see clearly successful teaching practices" (650). In other words, teaching "effectively with well-designed, hands-on lessons that display classroom management strategies and exemplify a rapport with students" allows PSTs "to conceptualize effective teaching practices towards developing their own knowledge and skills" (Hudson 2004, 143).

When it comes to some specific teaching practices modeled by TMs during the TP, both groups of participants agree TMs paid special attention to including a variety of well-designed activities, which equipped PSTs with an extensive toolkit they can use in different classes with diverse objectives and with students who have different needs and learning

styles. Furthermore, as noted by TM07 in the previous section, it reinforces the idea that teaching is a lifelong journey of continuous learning. Both groups further agree that TMs displayed enthusiasm while teaching and had a good rapport with pupils, which is in line with Hudson's model (2004): enthusiastic TMs create an environment where learning is an exciting experience and they foster positive relationships with pupils, thus inspiring PSTs to approach their own teaching in the same way.

Figure 3 shows, however, that while many TMs tried to incorporate the presentation-practice-production (PPP) lesson structure in their classes, this is not what most PSTs observed in lessons modeled by their TMs. There might have been cases where TMs wanted to demonstrate different lesson structures that PSTs were not familiar with (since PPP was the only lesson structure covered in the TEFL Methodology 1 course) or cases where unexpected situations in the classroom prompted TMs to diverge from the PPP structure. Another explanation, however, might be that PSTs simply did not recognize certain activities as demonstrating the practice or the production stage of the lesson because they might not have the tools and experience to identify the PPP structure in action. It might also be the case that PSTs are used to having clear breaks between the activities in a lesson plan and were not able to identify the PPP structure in a class where there was a smooth transition between the activities.

The discrepancy between TMs trying to incorporate the PPP structure and PSTs not recognizing it in observed lessons highlights a significant challenge for PSTs in making connections between theory and practice, which is not unique to this study or this specific context (Hennissen, Beckers, and Moerkerke 2017; Korthagen 2010; Yin 2019). Therefore, studies such as this one are crucial in exploring the TP and identifying areas where PSTs need additional support and guidance such as further instruction on lesson planning and structure or more opportunities for lesson observation and reflection.

Since lesson observations represent "a useful tool for mentors to elicit mentees' reflection, and produce learning points for constructive discussions" (Hairon et al. 2020, 111), the participants were asked in a follow-up question whether TMs included any discussions to help the PSTs analyze and reflect on the observed lessons. Almost all the participants answered affirmatively, which was expected given that TMs in general encouraged PSTs to reflect on lessons they observed and held (see Figure 1). According to TMs' reports, in the post-lesson discussions, PSTs were usually expected to *talk about the lesson they had observed; try to come up with different ideas; discuss what they considered good or/ and bad parts of the lesson* (TM20), to *analyze and reflect on the activities, timing, pupil engagement, what worked and what didn't, what could have been done in a different way and how* (TM13) or to *identify the strong and the weak points of the classes and list all the possible ways for improvement* (TM16). Such *reflection sessions* (TM16) are essential for PSTs' professional growth as they allow PSTs to think critically about their own decisions in the classroom and brainstorm solutions for similar situations they might encounter in the future.

4.4. PSTs' teaching before and after the TP

Another set of questions referred to the aspects of teaching that PSTs were well-prepared for at the beginning of the TP and those where they made the greatest progress during the TP. When asked in the multiple-choice question about the aspects of teaching PSTs were well-prepared for at the beginning of the TP, the two groups mostly offered similar answers with a slight difference in their ranking (Figure 4). Both groups think that

PSTs were well-prepared for: 'engaging pupils in the activities', 'designing lessons that align with curriculum objectives' and 'managing time effectively'.

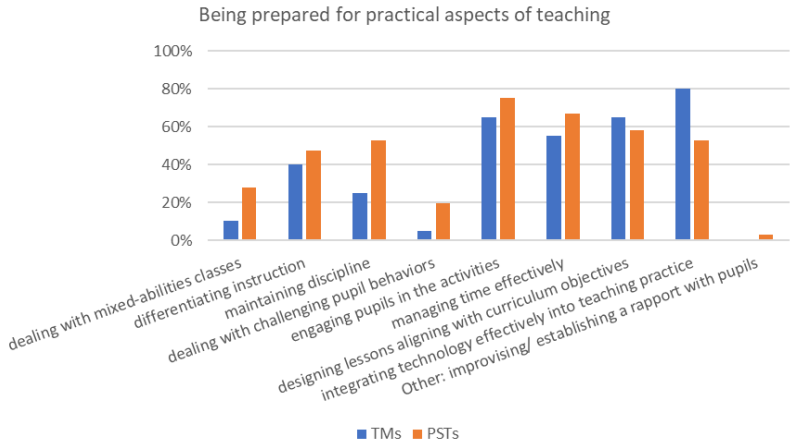

Fig. 4 The participants' answers regarding PSTs' preparedness for the TP

However, there were also aspects of teaching that the two groups expressed certain disagreements about. Thus, 52.8% of PSTs believed that they were well prepared for 'maintaining discipline', while 25% of TMs shared this opinion. Similarly, some PSTs believed to a considerable extent that they were well-prepared for: 'dealing with mixed ability classes' (27.8%) and 'dealing with challenging pupil behavior' (19.4%), while only 5% and 10% of TMs respectively believed that PSTs were prepared for these aspects of teaching. Finally, the two groups viewed differently the aspect of PSTs' 'integrating technology effectively into teaching practice'. While this answer topped the TMs' list, it shared positions 4 and 5 on the PSTs' list. Considering TMs' teaching and mentoring experience, we can assume that the difference can be attributed to belonging to different generations: TMs mostly belong to the generation of "digital emigrants", while PSTs to "digital natives" (Prensky 2001), but the matter needs to be investigated further.

When asked in the follow-up open-ended question where they noticed their greatest progress during the TP, PSTs replied 'time management' most frequently. They also mentioned 'maintaining class discipline', 'gaining confidence' and 'being more relaxed'. For a few PSTs, better communication with pupils was of particular significance. They felt good because they became *the authority to pupils* (PST20), they could *[connect] with the students* (PST27) and *manage the whole class of young teenagers* (PST26). As a result, PSTs became *more relaxed and friendly with students* (PST01) during classes and could even *improvise during [the] activities whenever it is needed* (PST28), i.e., divert from the strict script of the lesson plan and adapt their behavior to the situation in the classroom. Finding and designing activities was not as prominent on the PSTs' list, but thanks to TMs' insistence on including new activities, that was mentioned by some PSTs: *I improved with ... figuring out what activities fit what lesson* (PST10), *I became ... able to see which activities are actually effective and useful for the students* (PST25), *I have learned to ... make more effective exercises for certain grades* (PST33).

Generally, PSTs' responses show that they were mostly focused on their own feelings and communication with pupils, which is a common finding in literature especially if PSTs are at the beginning of their teaching career. For example, Ambrosetti found that first-year PSTs – those at the beginning of the practical part of the ITE – "focused on gaining confidence 'in front of the class' and in 'managing learning experiences' which corresponds to limited time spent in their professional placement" (2010, 125).

In their answers to the open-ended question about PSTs' progress during the TP, TMs agreed with PSTs that PSTs made progress in the aspects of 'gaining confidence/ being confident' and 'time management', but they also added 'dealing with mixed-ability classes', which was not as prominent on the PSTs' list. As TMs were particularly focused on using a variety of well-prepared activities in their own teaching, they referred to this aspect in their comments about PSTs' progress as well, although it was not frequently mentioned by PSTs. TMs noted that PSTs *developed suitable activities for the students' level* (TM01), *used well designed activities* (TM08), *[chose] proper activities for students of different age* (TM14), *[chose] adequate warm-up activities* (TM17) and *[found] activities outside the book* (TM18).

Basically, when talking about PSTs' preparedness for the TP, PSTs and TMs did not show great difference in the ranking questions, except for the use of technology and maintaining class discipline. Furthermore, PSTs seem to have been more focused on developing their teacher identity, building confidence and communicating with pupils while aspects such as dealing with mixed-ability classes and choosing and designing different activities were not really of primary importance to them at that moment. These differences in perceptions between the two cohorts can be ascribed to the difference in experience and stages of professional development.

4.5. Benefits and challenges of mentoring

The final multiple-choice questions in the TMs' questionnaire referred to the benefits and challenges of being a mentor. As for the benefits, 100% of TMs chose the item: 'contributing to the profession by sharing my knowledge and skill', which is in line with the findings reported in other studies (Jewell 2007, Walkington 2005). This one is followed by 'renewed enthusiasm and inspiration' and 'refreshing my own teaching and enhancing my professional development' (85% each). As for the challenges, the only answer that had the response rate over 50% was 'difficulty to balance between my regular teaching workload and mentoring students' (65%). Next on the list were 'unpaid additional workload' (40%) and 'difficulty to balance between being too demanding and being too lenient' (35%).

Finally, when asked which aspect of mentoring they cherished the most, TMs gave a range of answers: from *[i]t gave me enthusiasm, inspiration for further work, personal and professional satisfaction. It made me feel useful. I got an opportunity to step out of the everyday teachers' routine* (TM02) and *…mentoring is a mutual development based on cooperation and positive feelings* (TM17) to *[a]ssisting young people to develop the skills and mindset for continuous learning and self-improvements as a teacher* (TM20) and *[h]elp young people with their future professions whether it is in teaching or other. Teaching is the most demanding and yet most fulfilling work and managing it can help students in any other future profession* (TM06).

As we can see, TMs in this sample are well aware of both benefits and challenges of being a mentor and hosting PSTs during their TP; however, the positive aspects seem to outweigh the challenges, which may be one of the reasons why many of them have accepted to be mentors for years.

5. Limitations and Conclusions

This study investigated TMs' and PSTs' views on the TP organized by the Niš English Department in 2022/23 and realized in a specific local context – in Niš schools. Referring back to the research questions, the results of the study suggest that there is a high degree of agreement between the two groups. Both groups state that TMs provided both cognitive and affective support to PSTs (although PSTs valued affective support more), which was important for PSTs to build confidence and be better prepared for the teaching process. The differences in opinions on some segments of the TP result from the participants being in different social positions and at different stages in professional development. While TMs are more concerned with being a better model to PSTs, exhibiting enthusiasm for teaching and trying to introduce a variety of activities, PSTs seem to be unaware of those; they are mostly focused on their confidence, personal performance and communication with students.

As for the limitations, most of them result from using the questionnaire as a data collecting tool, making it impossible for the researchers to ask any follow-up questions or ask for elaboration or clarification. The use of focus groups or semi-structured interviews in some future research might be helpful for getting a deeper insight into TMs' and PSTs' views on the TP. Another limitation is a relatively low response rate, particularly among PSTs. The fact that not all groups of PSTs were represented in the sample calls for the question of "selection bias" (Ball 2019). This fact also explains why it was not possible to match and compare the data provided by each group of PSTs with their respective TM's and why the findings were presented globally for each group respectively.

The findings of this study suggest that TMs and PSTs greatly agree in their views of the TP, but also that there are no gaps between what PSTs learn at university and what they learn during the TP. This may suggest that at the Niš English Department the selection and preparation of TMs, and the organization and structure of the TP are in line with the TEFL Methodology courses at university and that university instructors, TMs and PSTs do share a common philosophy of teaching. The contribution of the study, however, goes beyond the local context as the findings add to the representation of diverse perspectives in international ITE research. By exploring the TP experience from the perspectives of TMs and PSTs in Serbia together with research from other countries, researchers can make comparisons, identify similarities and differences, and gain insights into the effectiveness of different TP models.

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ISPITIVANJE MIŠLJENJA MENTORA I STUDENATA ANGLISTIKE O METODIČKOM PRAKTIKUMU

Ovo istraživanje ispituje mišljenje nastavnika-mentora i studenata anglistike o metodičkom praktikumu koji je realizovan na Departmanu za anglistiku u Nišu u toku 2022/23. U tu svrhu sastavljena su dva upitnika - jedan za mentore, a drugi za studente - koji se u mnogim aspektima podudaraju. Upitnici su delom zasnovani na Hadsonovom modelu mentorstva u cilju efikasne nastave (Hudson 2004). U istraživanju se koristi kvalitativna analiza da bi se na sveobuhvatan način razumelo kako ove dve grupe vide praktikum. Upitnik ispituje nekoliko ključnih oblasti, kao što su: uloga mentora u pružanju podrške studentima, upoznavanje sa praktičnim aspektima nastave i razvijanje odnosa između mentora i studenata. Pored ovog, istraživanje se bavi pripremljenošću studenata za praktikum, kao i mišljenjem mentora o dobrim i lošim stranama mentorisanja. Rezultati pokazuje da su mentori pružili studentima i kognitivnu i emotivnu podršku, mada su studenti više cenili onu emotivnu. Studenti su generalno koristili pozitivne termine da bi opisali svoj odnos s mentorima. Rezultati ukazuju da su se mentori trudili da iskažu entuzijazam i koriste raznovrsne aktivnosti kako bi bili dobar uzor studentima, ali da su studenti više bili usredsređeni na sopstveno samopouzdanje i ponašanje kao nastavnika.

Ključne reči: *Metodika nastave engleskog jezika, metodički praktikum, nastavnici-mentori, studenti, efikasno mentorstvo, praktična nastava*