What Type of Feedback do Student Teachers Expect from their School Mentors during Practicum Experience? The Case of Spanish EFL Student Teachers

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Abstract: Mentorship represents a vital component in all teacher education programmes since mentors' feedback plays an essential role in shaping candidate teachers' professional identity. The quality of feedback provided by school mentors during the practicum experience constitutes the main focus of this study. This research paper aimed at investigating Spanish EFL student teachers' needs and expectations from their school mentors' feedback in the practicum setting, drawing particular attention to what areas or aspects related to mentor feedback needed improvement. Both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies were used in the study. The resulting data revealed a high degree of satisfaction among the surveyed student teachers concerning the quality of mentor feedback, meeting their needs and expectations in a very substantial manner. Specifically, the main strength of mentors' feedback lies in its supportive and affective nature while the main weakness highlighted was the need for a more detailed and continued input or feedback from school mentors. Thus, this research paper highlights the gap between the quality of feedback provided by school mentors and mentees' expectations and satisfactions during their professional school experiences.

Introduction

Learning to teach through practicum experiences, which is viewed as a highly complex process in which multiple influences, dilemmas and tensions emerge (Velez, 2003; Gan, 2013), is essential for student teachers' professional preparation (Farrell, 2007). This field experience is key to professional learning because student teachers have the opportunity to experience authentic classroom situations as well as to become familiar with a wide variety of learning and teaching strategies and techniques (Chien, 2014). No doubt, the school-based practicum experience represents the most critical and important component of all teacher education programmes for professional preparation (Farrell, 2001, 2003; Crookes, 2003; Wright, 2010). Almost without exception, student teachers highly value the practical teaching experiences obtained during the practicum period, and these have a major influence on their developing professional growth (Aiken & Day, 1999). In short, the teaching practicum process constitutes a fundamental experience for the professional preparation of every candidate teacher. Through the practicum, which is generally viewed as a 'core learning experience', student teachers become socialized into the teaching profession (Farrell, 2001). The importance and need for the practicum as a learning-oriented field experience is in fact highly valued by student teachers (Pekkanli, 2011). Specifically, the quality of feedback provided by school mentors during the practicum experience constitutes the main focus of

this study. Drawing on a literature review of the mentoring process in teacher education, the principal aim of this research study is to analyse what student teachers value and expect from their school mentors in terms of feedback and to what extent the feedback provided meets their needs and expectations during practicum experience.

Integration of Theory and Practice

Throughout the teaching practicum process student teachers become aware of theory being put into practice (Ximena & Méndez, 2008). However, as Mai & Baldauf (2010) argued, what student teachers have learned in university training rooms may be in conflict with the reality of classrooms, particularly with what they see and what they are expected to do in practice. The study reported by Gan (2013) suggests that putting theory into classroom practice involves an enormous challenge during the practicum experience characterized by a 'reality shock'. Bridging the gap between theory and practice has always been a matter of profound discussion in the professional preparation of all language teachers, becoming a highly controversial issue in the field of second language education (Wallace, 1996; Farrell, 1998; Cheng et al., 2010). In order to improve the quality of teacher education programmes and bridge the gap between theory and practice, Cheng et al. (2010, p. 102) suggested that 'teacher educators help student teachers identify the gap between teaching and theory, and continually facilitate them in connecting their learnt theory and practice'.

Mentoring in Teacher Education

Among the important aspects of the practicum experience, the mentoring relationship between school mentors and student teachers is crucial (Wang & Odell, 2002; Weasmer & Woods, 2003; Hobson et al., 2009; Delaney, 2012; Myers & Anderson, 2012; Fletcher & Mullen, 2012; Kemmis et al., 2014; Rakicioglu-Soylemez & Eroz-Tuga, 2014; Aspfors & Fransson, 2015). Mentoring as a means of supporting the professional learning and development of student teachers represents a vital component in all teacher education programmes as mentors' feedback plays an important role in shaping the professional identity of candidate teachers (Pekkanli, 2011). According to Aspfors & Fransson (2015, p. 76), 'Mentoring can be performed in many contexts, be based on a variety of purposes and theoretical approaches (...) and be performed under different circumstances in a variety of ways with different duration and intensity...'. Additionally, Myers & Anderson (2012) argued that there are various specific styles or formats in the way mentoring practices are implemented and, accordingly, mentoring needs to be considered from different perspectives. Drawing on empirical evidence from a variety of studies, Kemmis et al. (2014) identify three archetypes or forms of mentoring: supervision, support and collaborative self-development.

During the practicum process, the role of school mentors is fundamental in the professional preparation and/or growth of student teachers in that they constantly guide and support them on their way to becoming professional teachers. Overall, student teachers considerably value and benefit from mentoring experiences, although, as Ximena & Méndez (2008) remind us, sometimes they may feel obliged to follow their mentors' instructions and ideas even if they do not agree with them. Through mutual understanding and dialogue, both mentors and mentees should share their points of view according to their own classroom perceptions and experiences so as to be able to analyze in a reflective and critical way the effectiveness of the diverse classroom situations and experiences from different perspectives (Ximena & Méndez, 2008). Mentoring involves much more than simply guiding and

supervising student teachers' teaching performance during their practicum placements in schools. In this context, mentoring supports student teachers 'in their pedagogical practice by dialoguing, negotiating ideas and giving advice on the way they can improve teaching actions' (Ximena & Méndez, 2008, p.168-169).

Mentor Feedback

School mentors' feedback is essential in the practicum experience (Gutiérrez, 1996; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Gatbonton, 1999; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Wright, 2010) in providing student teachers with constructive feedback focused on changing teaching behaviours as well as continuous positive reinforcement and ongoing encouragement. No doubt, mentors' supportive and constructive feedback is imperative for the professional preparation of candidate teachers since, otherwise, 'they would feel lost in their self reflections and evaluations of their teaching practices' (Pekkanli, 2011, p.600). School mentors as expert or experienced teachers are expected to provide authentic, experiential learning opportunities through modeling (Saffolf, 2005). In this respect, researchers such as Hudson & Nguyen (2008) and Ximena & Méndez (2008) claimed that mentor teachers should help student teachers overcome context-specific difficulties. In short, mentors' feedback can contribute to improving student teachers' professional teaching competency in terms of self-awareness (Ximena & Méndez, 2008; Pekkanli, 2011; Hudson, 2013).

Mentoring Roles and Responsibilities

Regarding the mentoring roles and responsibilities, the research literature has shown that school mentors can act as a *role model, supporter, planner of teaching experiences, observer, demonstrator, advisor, counselor, evaluator* and *professional peer* (Clarke, 2001; Kiraz & Yildirim, 2007; Hennisen et al., 2008; Hudson & Nguyen, 2008; Gürsoy & Damar, 2011). In addition to school mentors' professional knowledge and experiences, Hudson & Nguyen (2008) also emphasize the importance of their personal qualities such as providing motivation, listening, sharing, influencing, counseling, being trustworthy and, most importantly, being supportive. In this respect, Sinclair (2003) also stressed the importance of interpersonal skills and communication skills in effective mentoring. Despite that the mentoring roles and responsibilities in pre-service teacher education is a growing research area, further research on the roles school mentors are expected to take on during the practicum process in the 21st century is needed (Damar, 2013).

Mentoring as Collaborative Practice

As the practicum process or experience becomes a valuable opportunity to share professional knowledge (Sanders, 2005), student teachers are obliged to work cooperatively with their school mentors. Damar's (2013) study examined what student teachers expect from their cooperating teachers and what they really experience in practice schools in terms of the level of collaboration and/or help provided during the practicum placements and thus revealed that the level of help provided by school mentors was below the level of teacher trainees' expectations. Rather, school mentors did not provide sufficient amount of help the student teachers actually expected. However, the teaching practicum should be an on-going process of reflection and cooperation between all the parties involved (Kemmis et al., 2014;

Aspfors & Framsson, 2015). In fact, the cooperation between teacher educators and school mentors also needs to be constantly strengthened (Beck & Kosnik, 2002).

The lack of supportive mentoring leaves, as Damar (2013) reminds us, student teachers alone to face the numerous challenges of their professional lives. This lack of support is highlighted by Ekiz (2006, p. 932) that 'The student teachers were still being left alone in classrooms with, apparently, an idea of 'learning by trial and error'. In this respect, Mai & Baldauf (2010) point out that many student teachers leave the teaching profession because they experience feelings of isolation (Farrell, 2007) and a lack of support from their school mentors (Valencia et al., 2009) during their practicum placements. It can be said that at times teacher candidates perceive that they are given little professional support and guidance in certain areas (Hudson et al., 2008; Hudson, 2012). Such insufficient mentoring makes them face the challenge of 'sink or swim' (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004, p. 682) 'with no-one to throw them a rescue float' (Pekkanli, 2011, p. 603). Since school-based practicum experiences have been evidenced to ineffectively mentor or supervise student teachers, Mai & Baldauf (2010) suggest the need for more effective mentoring processes.

Quality Mentoring

Certainly, the quality of mentoring as a guidance and supportive process is determined by numerous factors among which time, effort and personal dedication provided by mentors are essential. In this respect, Damar (2013) claimed that mentoring requires training, time, energy and enthusiasm. According to Ekiz (2006),

> *mentors should be encouraged to discover what it is they value and why they value it. Teachers involved in mentoring can become more effective if they are provided with a central awareness of the details of what they should do and how they should operate in their roles (p. 932)*

In short, the quality of mentoring may lead to both successful or unsuccessful practicum experiences because, as Sanders (2005, p.131) argued, 'There is a clear link between a positive practicum experience and excellence in supervision'.

The professional growth of student teachers in general, and how they learn to teach in particular have been the focus of a considerable amount of research aimed at improving the quality of teacher education programmes. Further research into the nature of mentorship is actually needed to improve the quality of the existing mentoring practices (Maphalala, 2013). Although many research studies emphasize the importance of the practicum experience (Fairbanks et al., 2000; Clarke, 2001; Osam & Balbay, 2004; Kiraz & Yildirim, 2007), very few studies in fact address student teachers' needs and expectations of school mentors during practicum (Hudson & Nguyen, 2008; Damar, 2013; Rakicioglu-Soylemez & Eroz-Tuga, 2014). Although mentoring from expert or experienced teachers has a fundamental influence on the student teachers' professional preparation, mentors' feedback should adequately respond to student teachers' professional concerns and needs. Thus, providing effective mentoring to candidate teachers during the practicum experience continues to be a major challenge in teacher education programmes because of limited supervision resources (Mai & Baldauf, 2010). However, as Hobson et al. (2009) made it clear, successful mentoring is mainly dependent on the 'willingness' to be mentored on the part of the student teacher because their resistance to being mentored implies a challenge to mentors (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015). As research into mentor education is surprisingly scant, the importance of a

systematic, long-term and research-informed mentor education which develops mentors' (self-) understanding of teaching and mentoring (reflection and critical thinking) is stressed (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015).

Based on the literature reviewed so far, this study seeks to analyse the quality of the feedback provided by school mentors during the practicum experience from the perspective of teacher candidates so as to improve current mentoring practices.

Method
Research Questions

Informed by the literature discussed above, this study examined the following research questions:
- Research question 1: To what extent are student teachers satisfied with their school mentors? To what extent do they believe that expert teachers' mentoring and feedback meet their needs and expectations and adequately prepares them for EFL teaching?
- Research question 2: What are the main strengths and weaknesses of their school mentors' feedback?
- Research question 3: What areas or aspects of the mentoring relationship or experience could be improved?

Context and Participants

The context of this study is the four-year EFL teacher education programme at the University of Extremadura in Spain. This programme has a school-based field experience component which consists of two compulsory teaching practicum placements (14 weeks each). These two practicum placements allow student teachers to observe classes in primary schools and to practise teaching under the guidance and support of a school mentor. The context of the study is the second practicum placement for student teachers which is offered in the last semester of the programme, although another 14-week practicum placement is undertaken in the first semester of the second year of study. The first two weeks serve as the 'observation period' for student teachers so as to familiarize them with their assigned school mentor teachers and the classrooms in schools. They are expected to engage in collaborative teaching with their school cooperating teachers by taking up the roles and responsibilities of a teacher in the school. The school mentor, as an experienced professional, is expected to provide constructive guidance and support to the student teacher. During the practicum experience, student teachers are not only able to observe classroom teaching but also have the chance to conduct micro-teaching activities, design lesson plans, materials and incorporate assessment tools. They are allowed to take over the assigned classes and conduct independent teaching. During this time, teacher candidates are constantly observed by their school mentors and also by the university supervisor at least once a month for the evaluation of their teaching performance. It needs to be added that four university lecturers as teacher educators (including the author of this paper) were responsible for supervising these student teachers in their second practicum placement. Overall, the practicum as a field experience constitutes a one-off period during which student teachers experience first-hand teaching practice in classrooms. During the practicum experience student teachers are expected to observe real-time teaching experiences and teach lessons that reflect the professional competences they have developed through their training process at the university.

The participants in this study were 58 (21 males and 37 females) Spanish EFL student teachers who were enrolled in an undergraduate TEFL programme at the Faculty of Education of the University of Extremadura (Spain). The programme consisted of four-year full-time teacher-training to teach English as a foreign language in primary schools. They were taking a teaching practicum course in the second semester of the 2014-2015 academic year. The group included one Erasmus exchange student from Germany. The students ranged in age from 21 to 22 years and were in their final year of study.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

This research employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. Specifically a questionnaire that contained both quantitative and qualitative questions, as well as semi-structured interviews. To gather detailed information about what Spanish EFL student teachers actually expect from their school mentors in terms of feedback, the participants completed a questionnaire especially designed by Pekkanli (2011), which consists of 22 closed-ended statements about diverse aspects of mentor feedback. In the quantitative section, respondents were asked to express their degree of agreement with the statements on a Likert scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire was administered to student teachers during classroom time at the end of the second semester in April 2015, taking no more than approximately 20 minutes to complete. It should be made clear that candidate teachers were not pressured to participate in the research. They were in fact asked to voluntarily participate in this study.

While exploratory in nature, open-ended questions in questionnaires as qualitative data collection method provide in-depth information and a great variety of responses (Dörnyei, 2003). Since qualitative research, as Spielman and Radnofsky (2001) remind us, strengthens statistical findings by helping to clarify the statistically obtained data, a qualitative section was also included in this study which contained two open-ended questions through which the respondents had the opportunity to express what they believed and expected from their school mentors. The two open-ended questions were not originally included in the questionnaire by Pekkanli (2011) and consisted of: *What are the main strengths and weaknesses of your school mentor's feedback?* and *What aspects of your mentoring experience could be improved?* In this way, respondents were encouraged to make suggestions on how to improve the quality of the feedback and relationship with their school mentors. The method used to analyse participants' responses and comments was theory-based content analysis, which is a widely used qualitative research technique (Cohen et al., 2007; Flick, 2009). The most frequently mentioned responses from the participants were categorized so as to determine the prominent likes and dislikes concerning the strong and weak aspects of their school mentors' feedback as well as their improvement proposals and/or recommendations. When coding the qualitative data, the minimum frequency cut-off point for responses of at least five occurrences was adopted. The main rationale for determining this cut-off point is that, although restrictive, five occurrences were assumed to be sufficient and acceptable to ensure methodological rigour in content analysis. Any cut –off point is, in fact, by nature arbitrary and to a certain extent is mainly determined to collect a reasonable quantity of data for analysis. The participants´ responses were grouped at a more conceptual level, thus allowing the identification of general themes from the data.

In this study, several semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 10 randomly selected participants from the total sample so as to verify the data obtained through questionnaire and open-ended questions. Each interview lasted approximately 5 minutes. For example, participants were asked to describe whether, and to what extent, their school

mentors' feedback fulfilled their needs and expectations and prepared them for EFL teaching, what challenges they had experienced during their practicum experience and what improvements could be made to overcome such challenges and, thus, improve the quality of current mentoring practices. Data from semi-structured interviews were also transcribed and analysed by means of content analysis. As Cohen et al. (2007) state, interviews provide researchers with in-depth information and might act as a complementary research instrument for gathering relevant quality data.

The questionnaire was administered by the researcher himself as a teacher educator, who explained in Spanish through clear and simple instructions the overall purpose and potential usefulness of the survey.

All participants were asked for their permission to use their responses for research purposes only. The questionnaires were completed anonymously in class and handed back on completion. Participants were requested not to consult their classmates while working with the questionnaire in order to ensure that the answers actually reflected each student´s own opinions and feelings. In this sense, as Oppenheim (1992) reminds us, the general belief that anonymous questionnaires encourage the participants to be more honest and sincere when answering must be counterbalanced by the possibility that people lose interest in the study because of its impersonality. Participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of the data.

Results and Discussion

The findings are discussed in relation to the research questions raised above. Statistical analysis of the quantitative data was conducted using SPSS 19. The calculated percentages of participating student teachers' responses are reported in Table 1.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Statement 1. My mentor respects and is tolerant of the individual differences of the teacher trainees.					
2.22%	0.00%	2.22%	40.00%	55.56%	100.00%
Statement 2. My mentor acknowledges and works through conflicts openly with me.					
0.00%	2.22%	8.89%	46.67%	42.22%	100.00%
Statement 3. My teacher works for consensus on decisions with me.					
0.00%	2.22%	11.11%	40.00%	46.67%	100.00%
Statement 4. My mentor shares openly my personal feelings and opinions about the teaching situation.					
0.00%	2.22%	4.44%	42.22%	51.11%	100.00%
Statement 5. My mentor trusts, supports and has genuine concern for my development.					
0.00%	0.00%	17.78%	26.67%	55.56%	100.00%
Statement 6. My mentor checks for my comprehension of the verbal messages.					
0.00%	2.22%	17.78%	42.22%	37.78%	100.00%
Statement 7. The tone of voice of my mentor makes me feel inferior.					
64.44%	26.67%	4.44%	2.22%	2.22%	100.00%
Statement 8. My mentor evaluates the effectiveness of the task and processes that I perform.					
0.00%	4.44%	33.33%	53.33%	8.89%	100.00%

Statement 9. My mentor assists me in developing my personal skills in planning.					
0.00%	8.89%	22.22%	35.56%	33.33%	100.00%
Statement 10. When giving me feedback my teacher first praises me.					
2.22%	4.44%	37.78%	35.56%	20.00%	100.00%
Statement 11. I can overcome, on my own, the unexpected difficulties that arise in the classroom.					
0.00%	4.44%	37.78%	48.89%	8.89%	100.00%
Statement 12. My mentor encourages my usage of various classroom tools and materials.					
0.00%	2.22%	11.11%	55.56%	31.11%	100.00%
Statement 13. Before giving feedback my mentor asks me to self-assess first.					
2.22%	15.56%	40.00%	26.67%	15.56%	100.00%
Statement 14. When giving me feedback my mentor criticizes my teaching.					
33.33%	44.44%	13.33%	8.89%	0.00%	100.00%
Statement 15. When there is conflict between the students and myself, my mentor handles the situation.					
2.22%	4.44%	31.11%	44.44%	17.78%	100.00%
Statement 16. My mentor limits what s/he is covering when giving feedback.					
4.44%	31.11%	35.56%	26.67%	2.22%	100.00%
Statement 17. My mentor concentrates on what I can change for the better in the teaching practice.					
2.22%	6.67%	24.44%	48.89%	17.78%	100.00%
Statement 18. My mentor develops my awareness of the tools and material which can be used in the activities.					
0.00%	6.67%	6.67%	60.00%	26.67%	100.00%
Statement 19. When giving feedback my mentor comments on specific behaviors and achievements.					
6.67%	8.89%	31.11%	37.78%	15.56%	100.00%
Statement 20. When giving feedback my mentor gives me general comments.					
0.00%	2.22%	20.00%	60.00%	17.78%	100.00%
Statement 21. While I am getting feedback from my mentor, I feel accused of my teaching practice.					
33.33%	42.22%	15.56%	8.89%	0.00%	100.00%
Statement 22. While giving feedback my mentor gives me time to think and respond.					
2.22%	4.44%	17.78%	55.56%	20.00%	100.00%

Table 1: Percentages of respondents selecting each alternative.

As can be seen, Table 1 displays the data obtained from participants´ responses with percentages of students selecting each alternative. However, the results are better illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the proportion of agreement and disagreement with each statement.
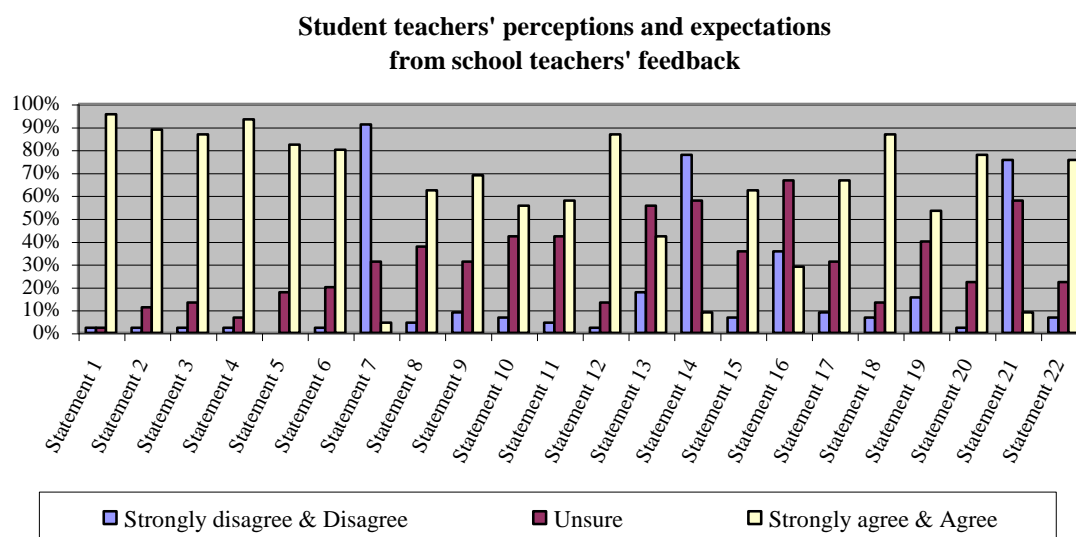
Student teachers' perceptions and expectations from school teachers' feedback

Figure 1: Student teachers' needs and expectations from their school mentors' feedback.

Quantitative Results

For reasons of space here, the emphasis has been placed only on those statements which generated very high levels of agreement above 70% ('strongly agree' and 'agree'). Before discussing the results in detail and given the focus of the present study, it can be concluded that the school mentors' feedback is highly valued. Nearly all the participants (namely, 95.56%) highlighted the need and importance of showing a respectful and tolerant attitude towards trainees' individual differences (statement 1). Additionally, the vast majority of teacher candidates (specifically, 93.33%) also assessed positively the fact that mentors shared and were openly receptive to their personal feelings and opinions about the teaching situations and experiences (statement 4). Likewise, most respondents appreciated that mentors helped them work through conflicts in an open manner (88.89%, statement 2) and worked for consensus on decisions with them (86.67%, statement 3). Student teachers also valued very positively the fact that school mentors not only encouraged their use of diverse classroom tools and materials (86.67%, statement 12) but also promoted their awareness of such tools and materials (86.67%, statement 18), which provides valuable evidence on the importance of classroom tools and materials for teacher candidates. Emotional and pedagogical support are also stressed because 82.25% of respondents appreciated that their mentors showed trust, support and genuine concern for their professional development which confirms that their school mentors' personal and professional qualities are highly valued (statement 5). The problems identified related to their 'emotional and psychological stress' when learning to teach within school settings are also discussed in Wang & Odell (2002) and Gan (2013). Likewise, 80% of respondents recognized the importance of the effort made by mentors in ensuring that their verbal messages were clearly understood by their mentees (statement 6). The fact that general comments were provided during the feedback process was also highly valued (77.78%, statement 9), which corroborates the importance and need for regularly receiving detailed information. In relation to this, we can see that three-quarters of the respondents (namely, 75.56%) also welcomed the fact that school mentors gave them enough time to think and respond during the feedback process (statement 22).

Before continuing to discuss the different levels of agreement evident here, it is worthwhile noting that the resulting data also revealed that student teachers showed low levels of uncertainty about their opinions due to the reduced percentage of responses in the

'unsure' category. In fact, only 7 of the 22 statements elicited over 30% of 'unsure' responses which perhaps suggests that teacher candidates' beliefs and expectations are clear. Interestingly, 40% of respondents were unsure about whether their mentors asked them to self-assess first before giving feedback (statement 13).

The following statements make reference to different aspects related to planning and classroom teaching performance which may be improved through supportive and constructive feedback from school mentors: statement 9 (receiving assistance for developing personal skills in planning, 68.89%), statement 17 (attention to what can be improved in the teaching performance, 66.67%), statement 8 (evaluating the effectiveness of the tasks performed, 62.22%), statement 15 (handling those situations in which there is a conflict between mentees and students, 62.22%), statement 11 (mentees' personal conviction of being able to overcome the unexpected difficulties that may arise in the classroom, 57.78%), statement 10 (praising first mentees before providing feedback, 55.56%) and statement 19 (commenting with mentees on specific behaviours and achievements, 53.34%). This is also supported by other studies advocating that mentors need to be friendly, supportive and helpful (Hudson et al., 2008).

Only three statements received very low levels of agreement concerning the quality of the feedback process. Surprisingly, only 4.44% of participants believed that the tone of voice employed by their mentors might make them feel inferior (statement 7), which supports the idea that the feelings of inferiority are not induced by the tone of voice used, at least for this sampling group. When receiving feedback only 8.89% of respondents perceived that their school mentors criticized their teaching (statement 14) and felt criticism of their teaching performance (statement 21).

Since many statements attracted very high levels of agreement among Spanish EFL student teachers, it can be concluded that high levels of satisfaction with the feedback provided by their school mentors were found in the present study. In fact, 14 out of 22 statements in the present study received levels of agreement above 60%, which confirms their high degree of satisfaction with the feedback provided by school mentors. Thus, the quality of the feedback provided is very positively valued by student teachers, which confirms that their expectations have been met. The evidence from this study is consistent with other research findings on mentor feedback (Hudson et al., 2008; Hudson, 2012).

Qualitative Results

In addition to the quantitative results, respondents were given two open-ended questions so as to gather more detailed information about their perceptions and opinions about the quality of their school mentors' feedback. The responses given through the open-ended questions and obtained in semi-structured interviews provided insightful data. Concerning the first question 'What are the main strengths and weaknesses of your school mentor's feedback?' various responses were given. In this respect, several themes were identified. The importance and need for a **friendly and respectful relationship between mentors and mentees** is fully emphasized through illustrative comments such as 'I am grateful for the open, close and friendly relationship by treating me as if I were another school teacher' and 'The fact that my mentor was very open and close was very important to me, making me feel very relaxed and comfortable in class'. Aspfors & Fransson's (2015) study is in line with these suggestions and stresses the importance of supportive relationships between mentors and mentees as being crucial for professional learning.

Several aspects related to mentor feedback received special emphasis, as evidenced in comments such as 'Providing constructive criticisms, comments and suggestions', 'Being

always available for helping and guiding me if there was any doubt or problem' and 'Helping me all the time by constructively commenting on what areas or aspects needed improvement, continuously reinforcing my teaching performance'. In such comments the value of **ongoing, supportive and constructive feedback** is particularly stressed, which corroborate other studies on mentor feedback (Hudson et al., 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014). This common strength was voiced by more than half of the teacher candidates, through comments such as 'I feel very supported and encouraged', and 'Supporting all my initiatives and efforts, although mistakes were made at times'. However, there were also some respondents who complained about the **lack of detailed input or feedback** from their school mentors, providing comments such as 'Little feedback on how the lessons are actually conducted is provided', 'My mentor just observes and does not evaluate the effectiveness of my teaching actions' and 'My mentor does not provide any correction when an error is made'. In this respect, some studies have suggested that some mentors have failed to provide sufficient support for student teachers, which corroborates the existence of variation in the nature and quality of mentoring support (Hobson et al., 2009). Regarding the lack of meaningful professional dialogue with school mentors, Gan (2013) also reported in his study that there were times when their supporting teachers did not seem very approachable. The problems identified as relating to the lack of supportive mentoring are also discussed in Wang & Odell (2002).

Related to the previous category, other comments, though, were more specific in focusing and highlighting **school mentors' receptive and flexible attitude** such as 'Considering my opinions when making decisions', 'Accepting all my proposals and suggestions, even asking for my advice' and 'Keeping me informed about every teaching action and decision'. In this respect, Aspfors & Fransson (2015) reported that the fact of accepting that the mentees may conduct their teaching in a different way than their mentors implies a challenge for the latter. Student teachers also reported their **preference for working alone in classes**, thanking mentors for allowing them to be alone in classes. This was reflected through several illustrative comments such as 'I was encouraged to teach alone in class from the very beginning, which I really appreciated', 'I preferred to be alone in class rather than being constantly observed by my mentor' and 'Being alone in classes is the best way of learning to teach by learning from errors'. However, several teacher candidates also made reference to **mentors' lack of confidence**, providing the following comments 'My school mentor gets nervous when leaving me alone in class, believing that anything might happen to me', 'Sometimes he interrupts me and acts during the lessons, although in an unconscious way' and 'When a conflictive situation arises in the classroom, my school mentor believes that I will worry and be unable to manage it'. In relation to this, there was one teacher candidate who made the following comment 'My school mentor is always present in classes which makes me feel continuously observed'. The Beck & Kosnick's (2000) study concluded that many mentors did not give their mentees sufficient autonomy or 'freedom to innovate' partly due to the uncertainty of classroom life (Hudson et al., 2008) and partly due to their concern to protect them (Hobson et al., 2009). Due to the challenge of carrying out two important tasks at the same time -teaching, and learning to teach- (Hudson et al., 2008), some mentors are reluctant to let their trainees take on responsibilities in the classroom (Hobson et al., 2009).

Another theme that emerged from the responses, which was voiced by almost a third of teacher candidates, was the **improvement of self-awareness** which is promoted **through experiential learning**. Several illustrative comments that expressed this idea were as follows: 'I have been taught different ways of teaching and managing children', 'I have been taught how to use new techniques, methods and materials' and 'The reasons why my school tutor teaches in a particular way have also been explained'. However, some respondents complained about the quality of their mentor feedback, through comments such as 'My

school tutor is not careful when providing feedback to me', 'Sometimes she does not inform me of what we are doing' and 'My mentor carries out class activities, which she assumes I am already familiar with, when in reality it is not so'. In relation to the previous category, but with a slight difference in emphasis, there were also comments which referred specifically to **mentors' personal and professional qualities** such as 'I appreciate her confidence and patience with me' and 'I assess her collaboration and flexibility very positively'. In short, discussions on the need and importance of a supportive and constructive feedback through **continued positive reinforcement** were specially emphasized. This view was evident in comments like 'Praising all my efforts and teaching initiatives', 'Trusting my teaching skills' and 'Evaluating my teaching performance reasonably, with much flexibility, but above all in a very tactful way'. Such mentor skills as the ability, willingness and patience to listen and to use positive reinforcement in motivating and providing emotional support were discussed in Hudson (2005), Ligadu (2008) and Kay & Hinds (2009). However, Hudson (2005) and Goodnough et al. (2009) also reported that lack of trust and emotional support could have a negative impact on the entire mentoring process. In short, Whitney et al (2002), Ligadu (2008) and Kay & Hinds (2009) concluded that the mentor's personal and professional qualities were an important factor in influencing the success of the mentoring process.

When asked about what aspects of their mentoring experience/relationship could be improved (the second open-ended question), respondents identified several areas or aspects. Overall, most participating student teachers wish or expect to receive **much more feedback** from their school mentors during their placement in schools. This idea was evident in the following comment 'More impressions, comments and opinions on the effectiveness of my teaching performance are actually expected and desired'. As is evident, such comment suggests the need for receiving much more input from school mentors but, perhaps most importantly, **a high-quality detailed feedback** is really desired, as is evidenced in the following comments 'It needs to be explained to me in detail the reasons why particular teaching actions and decisions are being made depending on the classroom circumstances' and 'I would like to be taught different ways of being able to improve the effectiveness and quality of my own teaching'. The results are in line with those observed from previous research, in particular Hudson (2012). In short, the comments from the open-ended questions and interviews were the source of the most insightful data in this study.

Finally, as can be seen in the analysis and interpretation of the findings, the qualitative results support the quantitative data. While the quantitative data confirm high levels of satisfaction with the feedback provided by school mentors, findings from the qualitative results help interpret or explain the quantitative data. In short, both quantitative and qualitative findings emphasize the importance of a continuous and detailed feedback during the practicum process.

Conclusions

How and what student teachers actually learn during their practicum experience and particularly from their school mentor feedback constitutes an area of limited research. The present study sought to investigate the topic from the perspective of teacher candidates. The discussion is mainly focused on the issue of the quality of mentor feedback during the practicum experience. The resulting data revealed a high degree of satisfaction among the surveyed student teachers concerning the quality of mentor feedback, meeting their needs and expectations in a very substantial manner in light of the very high levels of agreement. Based on the findings of the research reported here, it can also be concluded that the main strength of mentors' feedback lies in its supportive and affective nature while the main weakness

highlighted is the need for a more detailed and continued input from school mentors. As shown by the data, the student teachers value and expect a more quality constructive feedback from school mentors in terms of detailed input and emotional support so as to be able to know what/how they can improve to become effective teachers.

Some limitations to this study can be found. Perhaps future research studies should collect questionnaires and conduct more in-depth interviews of a larger number not only of student teachers but also of school mentors so as to be able to compare both mentors' and mentees' results. Obviously, the main limitation of the study is the size of our sample which does not allow us to extend our conclusions beyond the sampling group studied here. Teachers' training needs in mentoring constitutes an unexplored research area and, accordingly, deserves investigation. Due to its context-dependent nature (Rakicioglu-Soylemez & Eroz-Tuga, 2014), more research is needed in this area in the future so that we can increase our understanding of the quality of the mentoring process in general and of mentor feedback in particular so as to be able to improve the quality of current mentoring practices. While much is known about mentoring, much less is known about how teacher candidates actually perceive the input and feedback from school mentors. Even though the field of mentor education is under-researched, there is a need for profound research on how mentor education affects new teachers' professional development and teaching (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015). Mentors' mentoring competence and experience requires further research so as to be able to deepen the understanding of the feedback quality provided during practicum experience. Thus, further in-depth studies are needed in these directions.

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Acknowledgements