

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Changes in Middle School Students' Perceptions of Student Teachers Before and After the Teaching Practicum

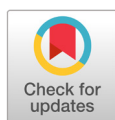
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ABSTRACT

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the changes in middle school students' perceptions of student teachers following a four-week teaching practicum, focusing on the students' perspective. A mixed-methods approach was used, involving 123 students from a university-affiliated middle school in South Korea who completed pre- and post-practicum surveys. Quantitative data were analysed using paired-samples t-tests, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. The findings revealed a statistically significant positive change ($p < .001$) in students' perceptions across all affective domains, including 'class enjoyment', 'relationship and communication', 'school life enjoyment', and 'classroom atmosphere improvement', with the exception of 'help with academic achievement'. The domain of 'relationship and communication' showed the largest effect size ($d = 0.81$). The qualitative analysis indicated that students experienced high satisfaction from forming horizontal relationships with the near-peer student teachers and from engaging with their novel teaching methods. These results suggest that the core value of the teaching practicum lies in fostering the affective domain rather than enhancing cognitive achievement. This study identifies key factors for a successful practicum from a learner-centred perspective and offers practical implications for creating a meaningful educational experience for both students and pre-service teachers.



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Keywords: Teaching practicum, middle school students, student teachers, teacher-student relationship, mixed-methods research, affective domain

Introduction

In South Korea's teacher education program, the teaching practicum is an essential curriculum that pre-service teachers must complete. It consists of school field practice of at least 2 credits and educational volunteer activities of up to 2 credits (MOE, 2025). Typically, the secondary teacher education curriculum in South Korea operates the school field practicum for four weeks. During this period, secondary pre-service teachers experience practical tasks in the school field, such as class observation and demonstration, classroom management, and student guidance (Jho & Kim, 2013; Kang, 2019). Therefore, the school field practicum is the most crucial educational process

for pre-service teachers to cultivate their professionalism and identity as teachers by applying the educational theories learned in university to the school field (Darling-Hammond, 2006). As the school field practicum is generally referred to as the teaching practicum, the term 'teaching practicum' in this study refers to the school field practicum, excluding educational volunteer activities.

Research on the teaching practicum has been actively conducted on various topics. Previous studies have mainly analyzed the status of teaching practicum programs (Jho & Kim, 2013; Kang, 2019; Kim, 2018; Lee, 2016), the role of supervising teachers (Choi, 2020; Choi et al., 2020; Ju & Yang, 2007; Kwon & Kwon, 2023), and the practicum experiences of pre-service teachers (Kim & Kang, 2014; Lee & Choi, 2016) and their satisfaction levels (Lee & Chung, 2018). Studies on the effects of the teaching practicum have identified positive effects on the improvement of pre-service teachers' teaching professionalism (Park, 2024), changes in teacher competencies (Jung & Jung, 2012), as well as on their self-efficacy and teaching career paths (Park, 2020; Sung & Won, 2023). The existing body of research on teaching practicums, however, has concentrated on the roles of student teachers and their mentors, thereby largely overlooking the perspective of the students who are most directly influenced by this educational activity. They have relatively overlooked the perspective of the 'learners (students)' who are directly affected by the teaching practicum.

The teaching practicum is not just an experience for pre-service teachers; it is an important educational event in which the students in the respective classes meet and interact with a new teacher for about four weeks. Therefore, understanding how students perceive student teachers and what influence they receive is a necessary part of identifying the multidimensional effects of the teaching practicum. However, to date, there is a significant lack of in-depth research exploring the effects of the teaching practicum from the students' perspective.

Particularly, middle school students, due to their developmental characteristics, react sensitively to their relationships with teachers, and this is a period when such relationships directly affect their learning attitudes and adjustment to school life (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). For students at this stage, student teachers can hold a unique meaning different from that of existing teachers. Being close in age, student teachers are perceived by students as 'near-peers', which reduces psychological distance, and the fact that they lack evaluation authority allows for the formation of more horizontal and comfortable relationships (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). Such interactions have the potential to uniquely stimulate the students' affective domain, which includes their attitudes, values, interests, and emotions regarding learning (Datt, 2021). However, there is still a lack of empirical research on what changes the teaching practicum actually brings to students' perceptions, and the specific patterns and causes of those changes.

Therefore, to fill this gap in the existing research, the present study shifts its perspective from the student teachers to the students under their instruction. From this viewpoint, we intend to analyze the impact of the teaching practicum on middle school students' perceptions of student teachers (pre-service teachers). To this end, we plan to apply a mixed-methods approach that integrates a quantitative approach to statistically show the patterns of perceptual change and a qualitative approach to explain the underlying experiential mechanisms of that change through the students' perceptions.

This study sets the following research questions to explore middle school students' perceptions of pre-service teachers participating in a four-week teaching practicum.

Research Question 1: To what extent are middle school students satisfied with their expectations and the effects of student teachers?

Research Question 2: What are the qualitative perceptions of middle school students regarding student teachers before and after the teaching practicum?

Research Question 3: What factors influence the level of change in middle school students' satisfaction with student teachers?

By addressing these research questions, this study ultimately aims to identify the key factors for a successful teaching practicum from a learner-centered perspective and to derive practical implications for fostering a meaningful educational experience for both students and pre-service teachers.

Theoretical Background

This study is grounded in the understanding of the teaching practicum as an interactive learning community. Traditionally viewed as a process for pre-service teachers' professional development, the practicum is re-conceptualized through theories like Lave and Wenger's (1991) Situated Learning Theory, which posits that learning is constructed through interaction within a specific context and community. In this framework, students are not passive recipients but active participants who, through interaction with student teachers, experience and learn new educational relationships, enriching their own educational journey (Wenger, 1998). This perspective underscores the importance of considering students' learning experiences and satisfaction as key metrics for a successful practicum (Valencia et al., 2009).

The significance of this interactive community is amplified when considering the developmental stage of middle school students. This period is a crucial stage for identity formation, where relationships with significant others heavily influence the development of their self-concept (Erikson, 1968). The teacher-student relationship is particularly vital, affecting students' academic achievement, social adaptation, and attitudes toward school (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). For middle schoolers, the need for relatedness—feeling supported and acknowledged by teachers—is a fundamental psychological need that enhances intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan et al., 1985).

Student teachers are uniquely positioned to meet this need due to their special relational characteristics. They are often perceived as 'near-peers' (Ten Cate & Durning, 2007), a role defined by three key traits:

Age Proximity: Being in their early to mid-20s, they are seen as older siblings, which reduces psychological distance and fosters intimacy (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003).

Flexibility of Authority: With limited or no grading authority, they create a space where students feel freer to be open and honest, allowing for natural 'caring' relationships to form (Wentzel, 1997).

Novelty: Their presence offers a fresh stimulus to the routine school environment, sparking student curiosity and revitalizing school life.

These unique relational dynamics primarily impact the affective domain, which includes students' attitudes, interests, emotions, and motivation (Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1964). Positive emotions fostered through these interactions can broaden students' thinking and help build enduring personal resources (Fredrickson, 2001). Given that the middle school years are critical for forming attitudes about learning, the positive affective development spurred by student teachers

is of paramount importance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This aligns with the shift in pedagogy toward relationship-centered education, such as Noddings's (2005) 'Ethics of Care', where caring relationships are a prerequisite for effective learning. Student teachers are well-suited to build these relationships, as they are less constrained by curriculum and evaluation pressures and may have a greater understanding of student culture (Gay, 2000).

Research Methods

Participants

This study targeted G-affiliated Middle School, which has consistently operated a teaching practicum for a large number of pre-service teachers across various subjects every first semester. The affiliated middle school was chosen because it aligns with the purpose of this study, as all students can experience a variety of student teachers, unlike other middle schools with a smaller number of participating student teachers, and it has a systematic practicum operation system in place.

The students who participated in the survey consisted of 37 first-graders (30.1%), 54 second-graders (43.9%), and 32 third-graders (26.0%), for a total of 123 respondents. By gender, there were 63 male students (51.2%) and 60 female students (48.8%). Seventy-one students (57.7%) had previous experience being taught by a student teacher, while 52 students (42.3%) had no such experience.

Instruments and Procedures

To investigate students' perceptions of student teachers (pre-service teachers) participating in the 4-week teaching practicum, we collected characteristic responses of middle school students towards student teachers through discussions with three on-site teachers with over five years of experience in practicum operation. Considering the convenience of student responses, we extracted five core items from various contents and revised and supplemented them by gathering opinions from 15 middle school students (5 from each grade) on whether the items were appropriate for measuring middle school students' perceptions of student teachers. As detailed in Table 1, the pre- and post-survey questions were constructed with identical content; however, their phrasing was modified by changing the verb tense to align with the

Table 1. Composition of quantitative items

Domain	Content	Pre-test Item	Post-test Item	Type
Education Practicum Perception	Class Enjoyment	• The class will be enjoyable if taught by a student teacher.	• The class was enjoyable because it was taught by a student teacher.	Likert 5-point scale
	Kindness, Relationship, Communication	• I will communicate comfortably and become friendly with the student teacher.	• I communicated comfortably and became familiar with the student teacher.	
	Enjoyment of School Life	• My school life will become more enjoyable because of the student teacher.	• My school life became more enjoyable because of the student teacher.	
	Classroom Atmosphere Improvement	• The classroom atmosphere will improve with the student teacher's guidance.	• The classroom atmosphere improved with the student teacher's guidance.	
	Academic Achievement Help	• The student teacher's class will help with academic achievement.	• The student teacher's class helped with academic achievement.	

specific time of administration, either before or after the teaching practicum. For the quantitative survey items, students were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale to indicate their degree of agreement with expectations or satisfaction.

The reliability (Cronbach's α) among the items in the middle school students' perceived practicum perception scale was .89, showing high consistency in the perceptions of the teaching practicum as perceived by the middle school students.

The content validity for the qualitative items was reviewed by two education experts and three teachers with experience guiding student teachers to ensure they aligned with the research purpose and content. The qualitative questions are shown in Table 2. Prior to administering the survey, the purpose and procedures of the study were explained to the student participants and their parents to obtain informed consent. Assurances regarding the protection of personal data and the guarantee of anonymity were also provided. The survey was conducted after assigning a unique ID to each respondent and was administered both before the start and after the conclusion of the teaching practicum.

Table 2. Composition of qualitative items

Domain	Timing	Question Item
Education	Before Practicum	• What expectations do you have for the student teacher's class?
Practicum		• What concerns and worries do you have about the student teacher's class?
Perception	After Practicum	• What was the student teacher's class like?
		• What are your thoughts on being guided by the student teacher?

Data Analysis

This study conducted a thematic analysis in three stages, following an Explanatory Sequential Design in which the quantitative results are further explored and explained by the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Stage 1 (Quantitative Data Analysis): The collected quantitative data were analyzed using the SPSS 25.0 program to determine the level of students' perceptions before and after the teaching practicum (mean, standard deviation), and a paired-samples t-test was conducted to verify if the change in perception was statistically significant. The effect size was calculated using Cohen's d .

Stage 2 (Qualitative Data Analysis): The Thematic Analysis procedure proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006) was applied to the entire set of 123 pre- and post-narrative responses. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, two researchers independently coded the data and then checked for inter-coder agreement; disagreements were resolved through discussion. The analysis followed these four systematic steps to derive the core themes embedded in the students' perceptions:

1) Familiarization with data: The entire raw data was read repeatedly to grasp the overall flow and meaning. (e.g., "In the pre-responses, I found a coexistence of expectations like 'want to get close' and concerns like 'they probably won't be good at teaching'").

2) Generating initial codes: Open coding was conducted, assigning a code that summarizes the core concept to the smallest meaningful unit of text, thereby assigning codes to all text segments. (e.g., "Unlike with the regular teachers, I think I'll be able to talk and ask questions comfortably." → Expectation of comfortable communication).

3) Searching for themes: The generated initial codes were classified and grouped according to similarity and relevance to form higher-level categories. This stage is the process of gathering fragmented codes to search for meaningful

patterns, or themes. Similar codes were bundled to identify common properties and were categorized into a concept that could represent them. (e.g., Expecting friendliness, expecting comfortable communication, like an older sister/brother, expecting to consult on worries → grouped into the higher-level category of ‘Expectation for forming an intimate relationship’).

4) Reviewing, Defining and naming themes: The derived categories were compared and reviewed again with the original data to confirm the validity and representativeness of the themes. Some categories were integrated or separated, and finally, they were clearly defined and given a final theme name to best represent the essential meaning of each theme. (e.g., ‘Expectation for forming an intimate relationship’ → Expectation of relationship formation).

Stage 3 (Mixed-Methods Integration of Quantitative-Qualitative Data): To explore ‘why such results appeared’ for the statistical analysis results of Stage 1, the patterns of change in the response levels for each item were subdivided. The response levels were classified into negative (1-2 points), neutral (3 points), and positive (4-5 points). Since the same respondents (ID) answered both quantitative and narrative items in the pre- and post-surveys, it was possible to analyze the narrative responses according to the level of change in the quantitative responses. Therefore, a mixed-methods study was conducted to deeply explain and interpret the causes of the level changes by presenting representative narrative response cases.

Research Results

Quantitative Changes in Student Perceptions Before and After the Practicum

The results of the paired-samples t-test, which analyzed the changes in students’ perceptions before and after the teaching practicum, are presented in Table 3. Students’ perceptions showed a statistically significant positive improvement in all areas after the practicum ($p < .001$), excluding ‘help with academic achievement’. The large effect sizes, ranging from 0.70 to 0.81, imply the program was a very positive experience for them.

Table 3. Test of changes in student perceptions before and after the practicum

Item	Pre (I)		Post (J)		J-I		t	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD	MD	SD			
Class Enjoyment	4.09	0.941	4.76	0.513	0.67	0.844	8.863	<.001	0.79
Kindness, Relationship, Communication	3.36	1.195	4.28	0.954	0.93	1.146	8.966	<.001	0.81
Enjoyment of School Life	4.03	0.966	4.63	0.682	0.59	0.838	7.855	<.001	0.70
Classroom Atmosphere Improvement	3.98	1.032	4.63	0.618	0.65	0.887	8.133	<.001	0.73
Academic Achievement Help	4.43	0.906	4.34	1.115	-0.09	1.228	-0.808	0.421	-0.07

The greatest improvements in perception were seen in the items ‘kindness, relationships, and communication’ (MD=0.93, d=0.81) and ‘class enjoyment’ (MD=0.67, d=0.79). The scores for ‘enjoyment of school life’ (MD=0.59, d=0.70) and ‘improvement of classroom atmosphere’ (MD=0.65, d=0.73) also rose significantly. This indicates that the

presence of student teachers played a role in instilling a vibrant and positive atmosphere not only during class time but throughout school life and the entire class community.

In the ‘help with academic achievement’ item, there was no statistically significant change ($p=.421$). However, considering the high pre-survey mean ($M=4.43$), it can be inferred that students had expected that the student teachers’ own university admission experiences or new teaching guidance would be helpful. The decrease in the post-survey mean ($M=4.34$), although not statistically significant, suggests a realistic awareness that the short four-week practicum is unlikely to lead to actual grade improvement, and it points to the possibility that students valued relationship-building or new learning experiences more than academic achievement itself. From these quantitative analysis results, it can be seen that the teaching practicum has a very large positive impact on the affective domain (relationships, interest, attitudes) of middle school students.

Qualitative Analysis of Middle School Students’ Perceptions of the Practicum

As a result of deriving themes about middle school students’ perceptions of the teaching practicum, before the practicum, themes such as expectation of relationship formation, expectation of a positive class atmosphere, and concern about teaching professionalism emerged as important. However, after the practicum, relational satisfaction, novelty of teaching methods, and regret over the short practicum experience emerged as important themes.

Qualitative Analysis of Middle School Students’ Perceptions: Before the Practicum

Table 4 summarizes the themes, sub-themes, and their frequencies as perceived by students before the teaching practicum. The analysis of middle school students’ pre-practicum perceptions of student teachers revealed themes of expectation of relationship formation (47.2%), expectation for a positive class atmosphere (25.2%), concern about teaching professionalism (11.4%), and other (16.3%).

Table 4. Thematic analysis: before the practicum

Theme	Sub-theme	N	(%)	Total
1. Expectation of relationship formation	Expectation for a positive relationship, including intimacy, comfortable communication, and enjoyable school life	58	(47.2)	123 (100%)
2. Expectation for positive class atmosphere	Expectation that classes will become more fun or the class atmosphere will improve	31	(25.2)	
3. Concern about teaching professionalism	Worry that class progression will be clumsy or the pace will be slow	14	(11.4)	
Other	No theme revealed, e.g., 'None,' 'I don't know'	20	(16.3)	

The characteristics of each theme and their related examples are as follows.

Theme 1: Expectation of Relationship Formation

Middle school students expressed expectations for forming relationships with the student teachers. They anticipated an intimate relationship based on age proximity, reflecting a desire for horizontal interaction different from the traditional teacher-student relationship. Related examples are as follows.

“Unlike with the regular teachers, I think I’ll be able to talk and ask questions comfortably with the student teacher” (ID 41).

“Because they are a young teacher, I think we’ll communicate better and it will be fun” (ID 66).

“It feels like I’ve gained a close older sister or brother, so I think school life will be more enjoyable” (ID 78).

“I think I’ll be able to more easily ask for advice on worries or school life” (ID 102).

Theme 2: Expectation for Positive Class Atmosphere

Middle school students expressed positive expectations for the classes or classroom atmosphere with the student teachers, revealing anticipation for new teaching methods or a vibrant atmosphere. Middle school students expected that classes with the young student teachers would be more enjoyable. Illustrative examples are as follows.

“If a student teacher leads the class, the class atmosphere will get even better” (ID 1).

“I think it will be good to have class in a new atmosphere” (ID 21).

“I think it will be refreshing because they will teach in a different way from the existing teachers” (ID 60).

“The student teacher’s teaching style will be new, so I think it will be good” (ID 75).

Theme 3: Concern about Teaching Professionalism

Middle school students perceived that the student teachers had insufficient teaching experience and were worried that their studies would be disrupted if classes were not conducted properly. There was also a concern that they would not receive proper instruction because the class pace would be slow. Related examples are as follows.

“I’m worried because the student teachers are still university students, so they might not be good at teaching” (ID 20).

“I’m worried that if the student teacher teaches, the class pace won’t be right and I’ll fall behind in my studies” (ID 94).

“If a student teacher teaches, I think the class won’t go well” (ID 40).

“I think they might not explain well or that order won’t be maintained during class time” (ID 65).

Qualitative Analysis of Middle School Students’ Perceptions: After the Practicum

The themes, sub-themes, and their frequencies identified from middle school students’ perceptions after the teaching practicum are summarized as follows (Table 5). The analysis of themes revealed in the students’ qualitative responses after the teaching practicum showed relational satisfaction (52.8%), novelty of teaching methods (33.3%), regret over the short practicum experience (7.3%), and other (6.5%).

Table 5. Thematic analysis: after the practicum

Theme	Sub-category	N	(%)	Total
1. Relational satisfaction	Positive experiences from relationships, such as kindness, comfort, and ease of communication	65	(52.8)	123 (100%)
2. Novelty of teaching methods	Positive evaluation of class content and methods, such as fun, easy explanations, and new activities	41	(33.3)	
3. Regret over the short practicum experience	Opinions that the period was short or wanting to meet more student teachers	9	(7.3)	
Other	Comprehensive positive experiences where the theme is not revealed, such as 'It was good,' 'It was fun'	8	(6.5)	

Theme 1: Relational Satisfaction

Middle school students showed high relational satisfaction through their classes and conversations with the student teachers. Students, who had been having rigid conversations with teachers in the traditional classroom, found that conversations with the student teachers helped in forming intimacy at school. Related examples are as follows.

“Because their age was lower, I could communicate more comfortably” (ID 1).

“The student teacher wasn’t a stiff teacher but was like an older sister, which was nice” (ID 14).

“They were kind to me, which was nice and fun” (ID 32).

“It was impressive to see them showing interest in each and every student” (ID 59).

Theme 2: Novelty of Teaching Methods

While middle school students had experienced classes that followed the textbook’s pace in traditional classrooms, the student teachers who visited for the practicum conducted active and new types of classes. Due to this experience, students became more interested and actively participated in the classes. Related examples are as follows.

“It was great that they conducted the class in a different way every time” (ID 21).

“They explained things in an easy-to-understand way, and I was able to participate diligently in class” (ID 23).

“They helped me participate well in class” (ID 69).

“It wasn’t boring because the class was based on various activities rather than just the textbook” (ID 75).

Theme 3: Regret over the Short Practicum Experience

Middle school students expressed their regret about the short duration of the classes with the student teachers. The middle schoolers thought of the student teachers not just as ‘guests who come and go’ but as ‘precious older sister and brother teachers’ and hoped the practicum period would be extended. Related examples are as follows.

“My school life had become more enjoyable because of the student teacher, so it’s a pity” (ID 6).

“It was fun and I thought it would have been nice if they stayed a little longer” (ID 7).

“I wish they could have had their practicum for longer” (ID 105).

“I wish more student teachers would come more often to teach us” (ID 113).

In-depth Analysis of Perceptual Changes by Item

For each item that showed a quantitative change, the specific patterns of students’ changes and their meanings were analyzed in-depth by linking them with the qualitative data.

‘Class Enjoyment’: From Unexpected Discovery to Fulfillment of Expectations

The perception of ‘Class Enjoyment’ rose from a pre-test average of 4.09 to a post-test average of 4.76, a statistically very significant increase ($t=8.86$, $p<.001$). To understand this change in detail, the change patterns were subdivided by combining pre- and post-perception levels. The classification criteria were divided into negative (1-2 points), neutral (3 points), and positive (4-5 points). The analysis revealed that out of 123 students, 120 (97.6%) either changed positively or maintained a high level of positivity, while a negative change in perception was observed in 3 students (Table 6).

Table 6. Classification of quantitative level change types for 'class enjoyment

Level Change Type	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Change Value	N
Negative → Positive	2.00	4.67	+2.67	3
Neutral → Positive	3.00	4.72	+1.72	18
Positive → Positive	4.39	4.79	+0.40	102
Positive → Neutral	5.00	3.00	-2.00	2
Positive → Negative	4.00	2.00	-2.00	1

To explore the specific reasons behind these quantitative changes, the narrative responses of students corresponding to the types of pre- and post-perception level changes were analyzed in-depth. The qualitative analysis confirmed that the students' positive perceptual changes were achieved through two main pathways: 'unexpected positive experiences' and 'fulfillment of existing expectations'.

The most dramatic change was observed in cases where students who initially had no (neutral) or negative expectations for the class had their perceptions completely reversed through actual experience. This shows that the student teachers' classes had a powerful ability to break through students' vague prejudices or indifference. The fact that all 21 students who had low or no expectations changed positively signifies that the student teachers' classes provided a new experience that surpassed the students' negative predictions.

Next, in the 'Positive → Positive' change type, which accounted for the largest proportion (102 students), the experience of having high expectations confirmed as a satisfactory reality was predominant. This means that the student teachers' classes were of a high enough quality to sufficiently meet the students' high expectations.

For example, a student (ID 5), who had vaguely expressed in a pre-survey response, "I have high expectations", showed that these expectations were met by specifically describing in the post-survey, "I could participate more comfortably, focus a bit more, and have fun". Additionally,

a student (ID 75), who had expected in the pre-survey, "I think it will be good because the teaching method is new", confirmed that the expectation for a 'new teaching method' was met through actual experience by responding, "The class was not textbook-focused but had various activities, so it was not boring".

In other cases, the pre-survey expectation of a student (ID 21), "I think it will be nice to have class in a new atmosphere", led to post-survey satisfaction: "It was good that they used a different teaching style each time". Similarly, the vague expectation of another student (ID 18), "I think it will be fun", was met with a positive evaluation of their 'eye-level explanation', "It was good that they taught us in a slightly easier way".

'Kindness, Relationship, Communication': The Strongest Driver of Change

The perception of 'Kindness, Relationship, Communication' rose from a pre-test average of 3.36 to a post-test average of 4.28, a statistically very significant increase ($t=8.97$, $p<.001$). This result showed the largest mean score increase ($MD=0.93$) and effect size ($d=0.81$) among all analyzed items, suggesting that the most intensely felt positive aspect of the teaching practicum for students was the relational one.

The analysis revealed that out of 123 students, 122 (99.2%) either changed positively or maintained a positive level, with only 1 student showing a negative change in perception (Table 7).

Table 7. Classification of quantitative level change types for 'kindness, relationship, communication'

Level Change Type	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Change Value	N
Negative → Positive	1.83	4.33	+2.50	18
Neutral → Positive	3.00	4.41	+1.41	34
Positive → Positive	4.44	4.67	+0.23	68
Maintained-Neutral	3.00	3.00	0.00	1
Positive → Neutral	4.00	3.00	-1.00	1

To deeply understand the reasons for this dramatic quantitative change, the narrative responses of students corresponding to the types of pre- and post-perception level changes were analyzed. The results confirmed that the students' positive perceptual changes were achieved through two key pathways: 'actual experiences surpassing negative expectations' and 'the satisfactory realization of positive expectations'.

The most dramatic change was seen in the 52 students whose perceptions rose from negative or neutral to positive. For them, the vague worries or apprehension they had beforehand were completely resolved in the face of the student teachers' sincere and friendly actual demeanor.

For example, a student (ID 50) who had anticipated, "I think it will be uncomfortable", completely reversed their perception after the actual experience, responding concisely, "It was good because they were kind". Additionally, a student (ID 14) who had been indifferent, initially stating "None", expressed high satisfaction with the unique horizontal relationship of the student teachers, remarking, "It was nice that they were like older sisters, not strict teachers". This shows that the students' preconceptions were positively changed through the student teachers' 'universal kindness' and 'relational proximity'.

Next, in the 'Positive → Positive' change type, which accounted for the largest proportion (68 students), the positive expectations students held were fulfilled through actual experience and developed into a deeper bond.

For example, a student (ID 41) who had expected, "Unlike with our regular teachers, I think I'll be able to talk and ask questions comfortably", confirmed that their hoped-for 'horizontal communication' was realised by responding afterwards, "It was good that I could talk comfortably".

Additionally, a student (ID 80) who had anticipated, "Since there isn't a big age gap, I think I'll be able to approach them in a friendly way", showed that the expected 'relational proximity' led to an actual experience of 'comfort' by responding, "It was good that they treated us comfortably". Even a student who had initially expressed expectations about the class, student (ID 59), was evidently more deeply moved by the relational aspect, responding, "It was impressive how they paid attention to each and every student".

'Enjoyment of School Life': Expansion from Partial Experience to the Whole

The perception of 'Enjoyment of School Life' rose from a pre-test average of 4.03 to a post-test average of 4.63, a statistically very significant increase ($t=7.86$, $p<.001$). The analysis showed that out of 123 students, 118 (95.9%) either changed positively or maintained a positive level, while a negative change in perception was observed in 5 students (Table 8). This indicates that the interaction with student teachers was not limited to specific class times but spread its positive influence throughout school life in general.

Table 8. Classification of quantitative level change types for 'enjoyment of school life'

Level Change Type	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Change Value	N
Negative → Positive	1.50	4.00	+2.50	2
Neutral → Positive	3.00	4.52	+1.52	23
Positive → Positive	4.41	4.69	+0.28	95
Positive → Neutral	4.00	3.00	-1.00	2
Positive → Negative	4.00	2.00	-2.00	1

To explore the cause of this quantitative change, the narrative responses of students corresponding to these pre- and post-perception level change types were analyzed in-depth. The analysis confirmed that the students' positive perceptual changes were achieved through two key pathways: 'vitality brought by a new presence' and 'expansion of positive relationship experiences'.

The most noticeable change was in cases where students who were previously negative or indifferent about school life transitioned to being positive. They discovered a new joy in school life through the new presence of the student teacher.

For example, students who initially had no particular expectations—such as a student (ID 4) who responded “None” and another (ID 32) who stated, “I don't think it will be very good”—later indicated that the mere presence of the student teacher acted as a new stimulus and source of joy in their otherwise monotonous school life. Their respective post-practicum responses were, “It was fun living with a new teacher” (ID 4), and “It was good and enjoyable because they treated me kindly” (ID 32). The fact that all 25 students who had low or no expectations showed such a positive change signifies that the teaching practicum was highly effective in increasing students' satisfaction with school life.

Next, in the 'Positive → Positive' change type, which accounted for the largest proportion (95 students), the positive expectations students held were further specified and led to conviction through actual experience. A student (ID 78) who had expected, “It will be like having a close older sister or brother, and school life will be more enjoyable”, confirmed that this expectation was met by responding concisely post-practicum, “It was good”. In particular, the expectation of one student (ID 111), “I think school will become more fun”, was specified in the post-survey response, “The classes were more fun”; and the vague expectation of another student (ID 104), “I think it will be fun”, led to the overall assessment, “School life was more fun and vibrant”.

These student responses show that they experienced the comprehensive concept of 'enjoyment of school life' through specific practicum experiences such as 'fun in class' and 'forming intimate relationships'. Furthermore, a student (ID 6) who showed expectations about the relationship, stating, “I think we will get close quickly, but it might be a bit awkward at first”, responded post-practicum, “School life became more enjoyable because of the student teacher, so it's a pity”, clearly showing that the positive relational experience extended directly to the enjoyment of school life.

'Classroom Atmosphere Improvement': Expansion from Personal to Communal Experience

The perception of 'Classroom Atmosphere Improvement' rose from a pre-test average of 3.98 to a post-test average of 4.63, a statistically very significant increase ($t=8.13$, $p<.001$). The analysis showed that out of 123 students, 118 (95.9%) either changed positively or maintained a positive level, while a negative change in perception was observed in 5 students (Table 9). This signifies that the personal relationships and class experiences with the student teachers led to an improvement in the atmosphere of the entire class.

Table 9. Classification of quantitative level change types for 'classroom atmosphere improvement'

Level Change Type	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Change Value	N
Negative → Positive	1.67	4.00	+2.33	3
Neutral → Positive	3.00	4.58	+1.58	24
Positive → Positive	4.42	4.70	+0.28	91
Positive → Neutral	5.00	3.00	-2.00	5
Positive → Negative	4.00	2.00	-2.00	1

To deeply understand the cause of this quantitative change, the narrative responses of students corresponding to the pre- and post-perception level change types were analyzed. The qualitative analysis confirmed that the students' positive perceptual changes were achieved through two key pathways: 'vitality brought by a new presence' and 'a comfortable atmosphere facilitated by positive relationships'.

The most noticeable change was that all 27 students who were previously negative or had no particular expectations about the classroom atmosphere transitioned to being positive. They perceived that the new presence of the student teacher itself was a positive stimulus for the existing class.

For example, a student (ID 4) who was indifferent pre-practicum, saying "None", responded post-practicum, "It was fun because it was with a new teacher", showing that the appearance of a new person contributed to refreshing the atmosphere. Also, a student (ID 3) who had worried, "I think the class won't proceed well", responded after the actual experience, "The student teacher was kind and didn't get angry, which was good". This suggests that beyond the concern about the class content, the student teacher's gentle and horizontal attitude was a more important factor in creating a comfortable and positive atmosphere for the entire class.

Next, in the 'Positive → Positive' change type, which accounted for the largest proportion (91 students), the positive expectations students had were further specified and led to conviction through actual experience. A student (ID 1) who had expected, "If a student teacher leads the class, the class atmosphere will get even better", responded post-practicum, "Because their age was lower, I could communicate more comfortably", confirming that the expected positive atmosphere was realized through 'comfortable communication' with the student teacher. The expectation from one student (ID 84), "The class atmosphere will become vibrant", also culminated in the overall experience of "It was fun", showing the expectation was met. In particular, the case of the student (ID 114) who expected, "It might be difficult to cover the exam material, but the atmosphere will become more comfortable", suggests a very important point. This student, despite being aware of the potential loss in the academic aspect, valued the comfortable and positive atmosphere brought by the student teacher more highly.

'Academic Achievement Help': The Gap Between Expectation and Reality

Unlike the items in the other affective domains, the perception of 'Academic Achievement Help' slightly decreased from a pre-test average of 4.43 to a post-test average of 4.34, and this change was not statistically significant (Table 3). This is an important result that suggests the effects of the teaching practicum appeared differently in the cognitive domain, unlike the other affective domain items which all rose significantly.

We broke down the score changes for 'help with academic achievement' into several change patterns, as shown in Table 10. It's a striking contrast to the other items: more than twice as many students' scores dropped (41) than rose (20). What's also remarkable is that 13 students shifted from a 'positive' to a 'negative' perception.

We conducted an in-depth analysis of the narrative responses from students corresponding to these pre- and post-perception change types to examine the causes of the quantitative changes. The analysis revealed that the number of students whose scores decreased (41) was more than twice the number of students whose scores increased (20). This showed a distinct difference from the other survey items, particularly as 13 students fell into the category of a significant drop from 'positive' to 'negative'.

Table 10. Classification of quantitative level change types for 'academic achievement help'

Level Change Type	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Change Value	N
Slight Increase	3.53	4.53	+1.00	17
Large Increase	2.33	4.67	+2.33	3
Maintained-Positive	4.69	4.69	0.00	51
Maintained-Neutral/Negative	2.70	2.70	0.00	10
Positive → Neutral	4.25	3.00	-1.25	8
Positive → Negative	4.80	1.80	-3.00	13
Neutral → Negative	3.00	2.00	-1.00	1

It was confirmed that the students' positive and negative perceptual changes occurred through two key pathways: the 'focus of experience' and the 'criteria for evaluation'. This helps to explain the reason for the decrease in the quantitative mean for the 'help with academic achievement' item shown in Table 3.

The most prominent feature is the tendency for high expectations for 'academic improvement' to go unfulfilled in reality, with that interest shifting to the affective domain. This is clearly revealed in the cases of students whose quantitative scores dropped.

For example, a student (ID 115) who had clearly expected academic improvement, stating in the pre-survey, "I think my grades will go up, and it will be fun because they are friendly", responded after the practicum simply with, "I feel like I've become closer to the teacher", making no mention of academic achievement. This response indicates that the core of the experience was 'relationship formation'. Furthermore, a student (ID 73) who had shown cognitive expectations by stating, "I think I will be able to focus better in class", later answered "None", suggesting that they did not receive the special academic impression they had anticipated. In other words, when their cognitive expectations were not met, students showed a tendency to reinterpret their experience by instead describing the affective aspects they were actually satisfied with (e.g., relationships, enjoyment).

The basis for positive evaluation was not in 'academic achievement (the result)' but in the 'teaching process'. Looking at the qualitative responses of students who maintained or increased their scores positively, result-oriented descriptions such as 'my grades went up' were almost nonexistent. Instead, like a student (ID 94) who had worried, "I'm concerned that the slow class pace will affect my exam studies", but then responded, "It was good that they taught the class well", students shifted their perception by evaluating the 'process' positively rather than the 'result'.

Even a student (ID 23) who had no particular expectation for academic improvement responded, "They explained things in an easy-to-understand way, and I was able to participate diligently in class", highly evaluating the student teacher's positive teaching behaviour itself. This shows that students interpret the concept of 'contributing to academic improvement' more as 'the teacher's ability to help the learning process' rather than actual grade improvement.

Discussion

This study conducted an in-depth analysis from the student's perspective on the impact of a four-week teaching practicum on middle school students' perceptions of student teachers. The research found that the teaching practicum

has a very powerful and positive impact on students' affective domain rather than their cognitive domain. The discussion of these results in connection with previous research and related theories is as follows.

First, the most prominent finding of this study is that the relational aspect acted as the core driver of the teaching practicum experience. The maximum effect size ($d=0.81$) and the 99.2% positive change rate in the 'Kindness, Relationship, Communication' domain empirically support Noddings's (2005) ethics of care theory, which suggests that the relational foundation may be more fundamental than cognitive content in education. It is particularly noteworthy that middle school students formed a qualitatively different relationship with student teachers, perceiving them as 'older sister/brother-like' figures, unlike with existing teachers. This shows that the near-peer learning theory of Ten Cate and Durning (2007) is valid not only in the context of medical education but also in general education. It is interpreted that the combination of age proximity and flexibility of authority provided students with psychological safety and enabled free communication.

However, in contrast to the rapid rise in the affective domain, no significant change appeared in the cognitive domain (academic achievement help). This should not be seen merely as a limitation of the teaching practicum but needs to be interpreted from the perspective of Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. Positive emotions and attitudes such as joy, interest, and intimacy formed through the teaching practicum may not lead to immediate results, but in the long term, they become the foundation for students' learning motivation and continuous psychological growth. Furthermore, it can be seen that intrinsic motivation was enhanced as the needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence, emphasized in Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, were met through the teaching practicum. This re-illuminates the fundamental importance of the affective domain, which is often overlooked in the current performance-oriented educational environment.

Second, an important characteristic discovered in the qualitative analysis of this study is that the positive effects of the teaching practicum showed a pattern of systematic diffusion. Students perceived that, through the individual experiences of friendly relationships and enjoyable classes, ultimately their classroom atmosphere and overall school life became more enjoyable. The key drivers that led to the students' positive perceptual changes can be summarized as relational characteristics (Gregory & Weinstein, 2004; Veldman et al, 2013) and new teaching methods (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Students had the highest expectation for forming intimate relationships before the practicum, and they expressed the most relational satisfaction after the actual experience. On the relational side, students gained emotional stability and the joy of communication, which are difficult to experience in the traditional teacher-student relationship, through a horizontal and intimate relationship with the student teachers, who have a relatively small age gap (Pianta, 1999). The concern about teaching professionalism that appeared in the pre-practicum qualitative analysis was almost absent in the post-practicum qualitative analysis; instead, positive evaluations of new and fun teaching methods were predominant. From a pedagogical perspective, the new approaches of the student teachers provided a fresh stimulus to the students. This shows that the student teachers successfully carried out communication and classes at the students' eye level. The qualitative analysis also clearly reveals why the significant increases in the scores for friendly relationships and class enjoyment occurred. Through interaction with the student teachers, students formed psychological bonds and had new learning experiences, which led to high satisfaction with the teaching practicum overall. This can be explained by

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. The direct interaction with the student teacher (microsystem) created a chain of positive effects on the classroom community (mesosystem) and the school environment (exosystem). This suggests the possibility of utilizing the teaching practicum not just as a simple individual teacher training process, but as a strategic resource for revitalizing the entire school organization.

Third, the mixed analysis of perceptual changes by item revealed that students experienced the enjoyment of class, moving from unexpected discovery to the fulfillment of expectations. The student teachers' classes, through fresh approaches different from existing standardized classes—such as new teaching methods, eye-level explanations, and a comfortable class atmosphere—provided unexpected enjoyment to students with low expectations and fulfilled the anticipated enjoyment for students with high expectations, establishing it as a successful educational experience for almost all students. Next, the positive perceptual change of students regarding kind relationships and communication goes beyond the dimension of simply meeting a nice teacher. This signifies that the students' need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000) was successfully met through interaction with the student teachers, and this positive rapport acted as the most important foundation and catalyst for eliciting all other positive experiences, such as class enjoyment and enjoyment of school life. The students' experience of enjoying school life can be interpreted as a comprehensive result of the combined effects of enjoyable classes and friendly relationships. In the end, it can be seen that the positive experiences of enjoyable classes and intimate relationships directly contributed to improving students' overall attitude toward and satisfaction with school (Hargreaves, 2001; Pekrun, 2024; Pekrun et al., 2023). This is an important result that suggests the effects of a successful teaching practicum can extend to the entire lives of middle school students. The positive perceptual change of students regarding classroom atmosphere improvement can be interpreted as a result of the expansion of the previously analyzed personal relationship formation and enjoyable class experiences to the entire class. It is judged that the student teacher's friendly attitude and new teaching methods increased the participation and interest of individual students, which in turn promoted interaction throughout the entire class, forming a virtuous cycle that created a bright and vibrant atmosphere.

Lastly, in the experience of academic achievement help, although students did not experience actual grade improvement through the teaching practicum, they highly evaluated the student teachers' passionate guidance and positive teaching behaviors like eye-level explanations. This suggests that while a short-term (4-week) teaching practicum has clear limitations in improving students' short-term academic achievement, it holds significant meaning in forming a positive attitude toward learning and allowing them to experience effective teaching methods.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Conclusion

This study, through a mixed-methods approach, has deeply investigated the impact of the teaching practicum on middle school students' perceptions of student teachers. The conclusions drawn from the main findings of the study are as follows.

First, the core educational value of the teaching practicum lies not in students' cognitive achievement but in the

cultivation of the affective domain. Through the teaching practicum, students' class enjoyment, relationships, and satisfaction with school life rose sharply, but there was no change in their perception of academic improvement. This clearly shows that students perceive the teaching practicum not as an 'opportunity to raise their grades' but as a 'fun event that brings new vitality to school life'.

Second, the two pillars that enabled students to have a positive change in the affective domain are 'horizontal relationships' and 'new teaching'. The qualitative analysis results show that students opened their hearts to the student teachers' kind yet non-authoritarian attitude and their friendly, 'older brother/sister-like' demeanor. The synergy of emotional stability from these horizontal relationships and the intellectual enjoyment from new teaching methods led to high satisfaction with the student teachers.

Third, the positive effects of the teaching practicum extend beyond personal experience to the community level. Through positive interactions with student teachers, students perceived that not only their individual satisfaction but also the classroom atmosphere and overall school life became more enjoyable.

In conclusion, this study has empirically demonstrated that a successful teaching practicum should be evaluated by the measure of 'how much more enjoyable and meaningful it made the students' school life itself.' This holds the important implication that when setting the purpose and direction of the teaching practicum, the quality of students' holistic affective experience should be considered a key criterion.

Suggestions

Based on the conclusions above, the following suggestions are made for each stakeholder to help the teaching practicum develop into a meaningful experience for both students and pre-service teachers.

First, student teachers should set aside the burden of perfect teaching skills and prioritize forming sincere relationships with students. Beyond being a 'kind teacher,' there is a need to set a goal of becoming a 'teacher who makes school enjoyable' by planning class activities or events that the entire class can enjoy together.

Second, teacher education institutions (colleges of education) should, in addition to teaching subject matter knowledge in their pre-service teacher training programs, provide field-oriented education that strengthens 'communication skills' for forming a positive rapport with students and 'Instructional & Activity Design' capabilities that consider students' interests and school life context.

Third, when evaluating and guiding student teachers, practicum schools and supervising teachers should use 'what positive changes were brought to the overall classroom atmosphere and students' daily school life' as a key observation indicator, in addition to the technical perfection of the teaching demonstration.

Fourth, the Ministry of Education and Offices of Education need to recognize the teaching practicum not as a 'university's academic schedule' but as an 'important educational activity that enriches the school curriculum', and they need to prepare an institutional foundation that can acknowledge the teaching practicum as an official educational activity that contributes to fostering students' affective competencies and improving their satisfaction with school life.

There are the following limitations that require caution in generalizing the results of this study. First, although the study was conducted at a university-affiliated middle school where a systematic teaching practicum is operated, unlike

at general schools, it was limited to middle school students in a certain region, so there is a need to expand the scope of the research subjects to students from various schools. Second, as the study relied on self-report responses through a questionnaire, there were difficulties in capturing the specific and vivid experiences of students as one might in in-depth interviews or participant observation.

As a suggestion for future research, a study on the perceptions of current high school students regarding the teaching practicum should also be conducted to compare with the results of this study. Furthermore, it is hoped that a comparative study with the school field practicum semester system (MOE, 2021), which has recently been piloted with an extended practicum period of one semester, will also be promoted to explore directions for improving the teaching practicum from various aspects.

Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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