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Expectations versus Perceptions of School Internship among B.Ed. Trainees in Special Education: A Multidimensional Factor-Analytic and Gap-Score Study

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Abstract

Background: The quality of B.Ed. special education courses is contingent upon the alignment between what pre-service trainees expect from school internship programs and what they actually experience. Significant expectation–perception gaps can compromise professional competence development in inclusive and special education settings.

Objective: This study investigates the multidimensional structure of school internship perceptions, quantifies expectation–perception gaps across five empirically derived dimensions, and identifies items where statistically significant discrepancies exist.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey was administered to 200 B.Ed. trainees enrolled in special education programmes across Delhi State institutions. A validated 47-item Perceptions on the School Internship Scale (PSIS) was employed. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with principal component extraction and Varimax rotation was performed to establish the dimensional structure of the PSIS. Paired-samples t-tests were applied to each item and to aggregated dimension scores to detect significant expectation–perception gaps ($p < .05$). Reliability was assessed via Cronbach's α.

Results: EFA yielded a five-factor solution explaining 67.0% of total variance: (1) Preparation, Planning, and Facilitating for Teaching–Learning ($\lambda^1 = 44.770$; 55.8% variance); (2) Preparation for School Internship ($\lambda^2 = 3.464$; 4.3% variance); (3) Multiple Roles of a Teacher ($\lambda^3 = 2.186$; 2.7% variance); (4) Co-Scholastic Activities ($\lambda^4 = 1.750$; 2.2% variance); and (5) Constraints of

School Internship (λ^5 = 1.382; 1.7% variance). Cronbach's α ranged from .81 to .94 across dimensions. Aggregated perception scores (M = 142.20, SD = 40.64) significantly exceeded expectations (M = 130.77, SD = 42.44); t(448) = 4.115, p < .001. Eight individual items showed statistically significant gaps, with the highest t-value for item 45 (lack of congenial atmosphere; t = 14.48, p < .001, gap mean = −0.99). Thirty items evidenced negative gap means, indicating unmet expectations.

Conclusions: The internship experience partially fulfils pre-service trainees' professional expectations. Structural reforms including extended practicum duration, pre-internship model lessons, greater pedagogical autonomy, and improved mentorship quality—are required to close persistent gaps and enhance the effectiveness of B.Ed. special education training in India.

Keywords: school internship; special education; teacher preparation; exploratory factor analysis; expectation–perception gap; B.Ed. programme; India; paired-samples t-test

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher education in India has undergone significant structural reforms over the past two decades, most notably the extension of the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programme from a one-year to a two-year curriculum under the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) regulations of 2014. Within the domain of special education, these reforms acquire heightened importance: pre-service teachers preparing to work with Children with Special Needs (CWSN) require not only a firm grounding in disability studies, child development, and adapted pedagogy, but also sustained and supervised practical engagement with real classroom environments (Ní Bhroin & King, 2019; Pasha et al., 2021).

School internship programmes serve as the principal vehicle for translating theoretical knowledge into professional practice. However, a persistent and well-documented concern in teacher education research is the gap between what trainees expect from internship experiences and what those experiences actually deliver (Filiz & Durnali, 2019; Sahragard & Mansourzadeh, 2016; Tindowen et al., 2019). Where this expectation–perception gap is large, graduates may enter

the profession inadequately prepared, with adverse consequences for the quality of inclusive and special education provision (Opoku et al., 2020).

Despite growing international literature on practicum experiences in general teacher education (Adams et al., 2020; Chukwurah & Chukwurah, 2021; Hora et al., 2020; Waber et al., 2020; Yawson et al., 2021), comparable rigorous quantitative investigations focusing specifically on B.Ed. special education trainees in the Indian context remain scarce. The present study addresses this gap by (a) establishing the factor structure of a validated school internship scale administered to B.Ed. special education trainees in Delhi State; (b) estimating expectation–perception discrepancies at the item, dimension, and composite levels; and (c) identifying specific programmatic deficiencies that require targeted policy intervention.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in the service-quality gap model, originally advanced by Parasuraman et al. (1988) and subsequently adapted to educational contexts (Abdullah, 2006). Within this framework, perceived service quality is operationalised as the difference between consumer expectations and perceptions of actual delivery. Applied to school internship, a negative gap (perceptions minus expectations < 0) signals unmet professional needs, while a positive gap indicates that the experience exceeded prior expectations. This framework provides both the conceptual scaffolding for instrument design and the analytical rationale for paired-samples comparisons.

Complementarily, Dewey's (1938) notion of experiential learning and Schön's (1983) reflective practitioner model underpin the assumption that genuine professional competence in special education can only be constructed through critically reflected practical experience. The extent to which internship programmes provide conditions conducive to such reflection is therefore a central evaluative criterion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

International research on teacher internship consistently identifies a tension between the curriculum-as-designed and the curriculum-as-experienced. In a qualitative investigation of six

teacher educators, Adams et al. (2020) found that classroom management competencies received inadequate attention during curriculum design, despite being identified by all participants as central to effective teaching. Waber et al. (2020), drawing on survey data from 136 student teachers, demonstrated that the professional trust differential between mentor teachers and team partners significantly modulates how trainees evaluate their internship experience.

In the African context, Chukwurah and Chukwurah (2021) documented that logistical barriers—particularly school allocation irregularities—were primary sources of dissatisfaction among Nigerian pre-service teachers, with gendered differences in mean satisfaction scores at the University of Calabar. Yawson et al. (2021), in a Ghanaian sample of 180 final-year student teachers, reported that structured reflective practice during internship was a key predictor of perceived teaching competence gains.

Within the Indian context, Mahato and Behera (2018) used ANOVA with a stratified sample of 250 B.Ed. students in West Bengal to reveal that attitudes toward practicum varied significantly by gender, locale, and institutional type. Jain (2015), employing the Teaching Attitude Inventory with 100 B.Ed. trainees, found that female trainee mean scores on internship attitudes differed significantly between pre- and post-internship measurement points. Kumar (2016) extended this line of inquiry using three-way ANOVA to examine interactions between gender, stream, and academic qualification on internship attitudes in the Kathua district.

Regarding special education specifically, Opoku et al. (2020) demonstrated in a Ghanaian secondary school sample that teacher attitudes and self-efficacy jointly predicted intentions to implement inclusive education, reinforcing the argument that preparatory programme quality has long-term consequences for educational equity. Pasha et al. (2021) similarly found that the self-assessed knowledge and skills of Pakistani pre-service special education teachers were frequently insufficient for professional demands.

A common methodological limitation across these studies is the reliance on single-dimension measures of internship quality, which obscures the multidimensional nature of school practicum experiences. The present study contributes to the literature by applying exploratory

factor analysis to disaggregate internship perceptions into empirically distinct dimensions and by providing item-level statistical evidence of expectation–perception gaps.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Research Design

A cross-sectional, descriptive-comparative survey design was adopted. This design is appropriate for simultaneously mapping the latent structure of a multi-item scale and estimating group-level differences in mean scores (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised all B.Ed. trainees enrolled in recognised special education programmes in Delhi State institutions during the academic year 2022–2023. Using purposive stratified sampling, 200 trainees (N = 200) were recruited across government-aided and private B.Ed. special education colleges. Institutions were selected to ensure representativeness with respect to locale (urban/peri-urban), gender composition, and funding modality (government-aided vs. self-financed). Participants provided written informed consent prior to data collection. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of Monad University.

3.3 Instrumentation

The Perceptions on the School Internship Scale (PSIS) was the primary data collection instrument. The PSIS comprises 47 paired items, each presented in two versions: an Expectations version (administered prior to internship commencement) eliciting the trainee's anticipation of what the internship would provide, and a Perceptions version (administered following internship completion) eliciting the trainee's evaluation of what the internship actually delivered. All items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Content validity of the PSIS was established through expert review by a panel of five teacher educators and two special education specialists, who rated each item for relevance, clarity, and representativeness. Items with a content validity index (CVI) below .80 were revised or

deleted. The final 47-item version was piloted on 30 trainees not included in the main study to assess face validity and item functioning.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected in two phases. Phase 1 (pre-internship): the Expectations version of the PSIS was administered collectively in the classroom approximately one week before the commencement of the school internship. Phase 2 (post-internship): the Perceptions version was administered within two weeks of the conclusion of the internship. To minimise attrition, participants were tracked individually using anonymised enrolment numbers.

3.5 Statistical Analysis

All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were computed for all 47 items in both their expectation and perception forms. The gap mean for each item was calculated as the perception mean minus the expectation mean; a negative gap mean indicates that expectations exceeded perceptions.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on the pooled PSIS item responses using principal component analysis (PCA) as the extraction method. Prior to EFA, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity were computed to confirm the factorability of the correlation matrix. Factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 (Kaiser criterion) were retained, and Varimax orthogonal rotation was applied to maximise the interpretability of the factor solution. Items with factor loadings ≥ .40 were considered salient for a given factor.

Internal consistency of each factor was estimated using Cronbach's coefficient alpha ($\alpha \geq .70$ was considered acceptable). Paired-samples t-tests were applied to compare expectation and perception means at both the item level and the composite scale level. The significance threshold was set at $\alpha = .05$. Effect sizes for significant differences were calculated using Cohen's d (small: .20; medium: .50; large: .80).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Preliminary Analysis and Scale Reliability

Prior to EFA, the KMO measure of sampling adequacy was .891, which is classified as 'meritorious' according to Kaiser's (1974) criteria, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (χ^2 = 9,142.67, df = 1,081, p < .001), confirming that the correlation matrix was appropriate for factor analysis. Item-level means on the Expectations scale ranged from 3.05 (SD = 1.28; records and practicum work) to 4.17 (SD = 0.67; gaining self-confidence in teaching). On the Perceptions scale, means ranged from 2.37 (SD = 1.00; congenial atmosphere in the practicing school) to 4.11 (SD = 0.45; self-confidence in teaching). The overall Cronbach's α for the composite 47-item Perceptions scale was .94, indicating excellent reliability.

4.2 Factor Structure of the PSIS

EFA with Varimax rotation yielded a five-factor solution that collectively explained 67.0% of the total variance in PSIS item responses. The scree plot inflection also supported the retention of five factors. Table 1 presents the eigenvalues, percentage of variance, and cumulative variance for all five retained factors.

Table 1. Factor Structure Summary from Exploratory Factor Analysis (N = 200)

Factor Name	Eigenvalue	% Variance	Cum. %	α
F1: Preparation, Planning, and Facilitating Teaching–Learning	44.770	55.779	55.8	.94
F2: Preparation for School Internship	3.464	4.316	60.1	.89
F3: Multiple Roles of a Teacher	2.186	2.723	62.8	.86
F4: Co-Scholastic Activities	1.750	2.180	65.0	.83

F5: Constraints of School Internship	1.382	1.722	66.7	.81

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha. Cum. % = cumulative percentage of variance explained.

Factor 1 (Preparation, Planning, and Facilitating for Teaching Learning) was by far the most dominant, accounting for 55.8% of total variance with an eigenvalue of 44.770. Eleven items loaded substantially on this factor, with loadings ranging from .540 (V30) to .696 (V22). Items in this factor address lesson sequencing, use of teaching–learning materials (TLM), application of diverse pedagogical strategies, diagnostic evaluation, communication skills, and facilitation of student engagement. Factor 2 (Preparation for School Internship; λ = 3.464; 4.3% variance) comprised 12 items (V1–V12) related to pre-internship orientation, unit plan preparation, and training methodologies, with loadings ranging from .506 (V11) to .723 (V1, V4). Factor 3 (Multiple Roles of a Teacher; λ = 2.186; 2.7% variance) contained seven items (V38–V44) capturing expectations and experiences related to guide teacher supervision, model lesson demonstrations, collaborative planning, feedback quality, and co-mentorship dynamics, with loadings ranging from .546 (V40) to .681 (V42). Factor 4 (Co-Scholastic Activities; λ = 1.750; 2.2% variance) clustered five items (V33–V37) pertaining to extracurricular and co-curricular participation, with loadings ranging from .538 (V35) to .663 (V37). Factor 5 (Constraints of School Internship; λ = 1.382; 1.7% variance) comprised three items (V45–V47) capturing perceived barriers to effective internship participation, with loadings ranging from .704 (V45) to .872 (V46).

4.3 Descriptive Statistics: Expectations versus Perceptions

Table 2 presents the highest- and lowest-ranked items on both the Expectations and Perceptions scales, together with gap means, rankings, and t-values.

Table 2. Top Five and Bottom Five Items: Expectation Means, Perception Means, Gap Means, and t-Values (N = 200)

Item Description (abbreviated)	Exp M	Exp	Per M	Per	Gap	t

		SD		SD	M	
Highest Expectations						
Gain self-confidence in teaching (V37)	4.17	0.67	4.11	0.45	−0.06	1.06
Teacher educators plan lessons before internship (V36)	4.10	0.66	4.02	0.54	−0.08	1.23
Freedom to practice theory during internship (V42)	4.07	0.55	3.71	1.04	−0.36	5.63*
Guide teacher demonstrates model teaching lesson (V38)	4.06	0.60	4.08	0.77	+0.02	0.45
Understand roles and responsibilities in teaching (V36)	4.04	0.65	4.02	0.54	−0.02	0.36
Lowest Expectations / Highest Constraints						
Congenial atmosphere in the practicing school (V45)	3.36	0.88	2.37	1.00	−0.99	14.48*
Practicum records and documentation not engaging (V46)	3.05	1.28	2.67	1.15	−0.38	4.87*
School internship programme was mechanical (V47)	3.20	1.26	2.70	1.30	−0.50	6.37*

Note. Exp M = Expectation Mean; Per M = Perception Mean; Gap M = Perception M − Expectation M. * $p < .05$ (paired-samples t-test, df = 199).

4.4 Aggregate Expectation–Perception Comparison

At the composite scale level, the mean total score on the Perceptions scale (M = 142.20, SD = 40.64) was significantly higher than the mean total score on the Expectations scale (M = 130.77, SD = 42.44); t(448) = 4.115, p < .001, Cohen's d = 0.27 (small effect). This finding indicates that, in aggregate, the internship experience marginally surpassed what trainees had anticipated, although the effect size was small and item-level analysis reveals substantial variation around this aggregate pattern.

4.5 Item-Level Gap Analysis

Thirty of the 47 items (63.8%) exhibited negative gap means, indicating that expectations for those aspects of the internship were not fully met. Fifteen items (31.9%) showed positive gap means, suggesting that those aspects exceeded expectations. Two items (V28 and V39; collaborative planning and co-planning with guide teacher) yielded zero gap means, indicating exact alignment between expectations and perceptions.

Among statistically significant items (p < .05), the largest expectation–perception discrepancy was observed for item V45 (lack of congenial atmosphere in the practicing school; gap mean = −0.99; t = 14.48, p < .001). The negative direction confirms that trainees perceived the practicing school environment more substantially less welcoming than anticipated. Item V47 (internship programme perceived as mechanical; gap mean = −0.50; t = 6.37, p < .001) and item V42 (freedom to practice theory; gap mean = −0.36; t = 5.63, p < .05) also demonstrated large negative gaps, indicating unmet expectations for pedagogical autonomy and programme engagement. Table 3 presents the full set of items with statistically significant gaps.

Table 3. Items with Statistically Significant Expectation–Perception Gaps (p < .05)

Item	Description (abbreviated)	Exp M (SD)	Per M (SD)	Gap M	Rank	t-value
V45	Lack of congenial atmosphere in practicing school	3.36 (0.88)	2.37 (1.00)	−0.99	47	14.48*
V47	School internship programme was	3.20	2.70	−0.50	46	6.37*

	mechanical	(1.26)	(1.30)			
V42	Freedom to practice theory learned during internship	4.07 (0.55)	3.71 (1.04)	−0.36	44	5.63*
V46	Practicum records and documentation not engaging	3.05 (1.28)	2.67 (1.15)	−0.38	45	4.87*
V43	Cordial relationship between teacher educators and guide teachers	4.02 (0.78)	3.85 (0.70)	−0.17	37	1.16*
V37	Gain self-confidence in teaching	4.17 (0.67)	4.11 (0.45)	−0.06	31	1.06*
V26	Opportunities to participate in all school activities	4.00 (0.81)	3.84 (0.68)	−0.16	31	1.01*
V40	Guide teacher observes all teaching lessons	4.00 (0.77)	3.94 (0.73)	−0.06	31	0.93*

Note. * $p < .05$ (two-tailed, df = 199). Gap M = Perception M − Expectation M. Exp M = Expectation Mean; Per M = Perception Mean. Rank reflects the rank of the gap mean (highest negative rank = greatest unmet expectation).

4.6 Dimension-Level Expectations versus Perceptions

At the dimension level, the most pronounced negative gap was observed within Factor 5 (Constraints of School Internship), confirming that practicum-related barriers were systematically underestimated by trainees prior to the internship. Within Factor 1 (Preparation, Planning, and Facilitating Teaching–Learning), the majority of items showed positive or near-zero gap means, indicating that the core pedagogical dimensions of the internship largely met trainee expectations. Factor 3 (Multiple Roles of a Teacher) showed the highest variability across items, with item V42 (freedom to apply learned theory) generating the largest significant gap within this dimension ($t = 5.63$, $p < .05$).

5. DISCUSSION

The present study offers three principal contributions to the literature on B.Ed. special education preparation in India: a validated multidimensional factor structure for the PSIS, a systematic expectation–perception gap analysis, and identification of specific programmatic elements most in need of reform.

The five-factor solution—comprising Preparation, Planning, and Facilitating Teaching–Learning; Preparation for School Internship; Multiple Roles of a Teacher; Co-Scholastic Activities; and Constraints of School Internship—provides an empirically grounded taxonomy for evaluating internship programme quality. The dominance of Factor 1 (55.8% of variance) suggests that trainees conceptualise internship quality primarily through the lens of instructional competence development, consistent with Dewey's (1938) experiential learning framework and with Tindowen et al.'s (2019) finding that internship programmes most effectively develop soft skills and teaching competencies.

The aggregate finding that perception scores exceeded expectation scores ($t(448) = 4.115$, $p < .001$) at the composite level aligns with Dahri et al.‡s (2021) observation that arts and science stream B.Ed. trainees do not significantly differ in their evaluations of practicum. However, the small effect size ($d = 0.27$) and the predominance of negative gap means at the item level indicate that aggregate comparison masks substantial dimension-specific and item-specific deficiencies. This pattern is consistent with Sahragard and Mansourzadeh's (2016) finding that, while most trainees had broadly favourable responses, targeted requirements were not consistently met.

The most critical finding is the large and statistically highly significant expectation–perception gap for item V45 (congenial atmosphere in the practicing school; gap mean = −0.99, $t = 14.48$, $p < .001$). This finding resonates with Chukwurah and Chukwurah's (2021) documentation of school distribution and climate problems in Nigerian internships and with Filiz and Durnali's (2019) Turkish pre-service teachers' dissatisfaction attributable in part to crowded classrooms and unfavourable attitudes toward trainees. The finding that trainees experienced considerably less pedagogical autonomy than expected (V42: gap = −0.36; $t = 5.63$) and perceived the internship as more mechanical than anticipated (V47: gap = −0.50; $t = 6.37$) aligns with Suman Gupta's (2021)

report that B.Ed. trainees struggled specifically with implementing constructivist pedagogy during their internship, suggesting a systemic disconnect between curricular aspirations and school-level realities.

The finding of no significant differences in expectations or perceptions by gender, locale, funding modality, first-generation status, or educational level (UG vs. PG) is consistent with Dahri et al. (2021) and suggests that the identified gaps are structural and systemic rather than population-specific, thereby reinforcing the case for programme-level rather than group-targeted interventions.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates that while B.Ed. special education trainees in Delhi State derive substantive professional benefits from school internship programmes—particularly in developing pedagogical repertoire, lesson planning skills, self-confidence, and diagnostic evaluation competencies—significant expectation–perception gaps persist, most acutely in relation to school climate, programmatic rigidity, pedagogical autonomy, and the quality of pre-internship preparation.

Based on the statistical evidence, the following evidence-based recommendations are advanced for policymakers, teacher educators, and institutional administrators:

First, the practicum duration should be extended and restructured to include graduated phases of supervised, semi-autonomous, and fully autonomous teaching, aligned with NCTE's recommendations for integrating experiential learning across the two-year B.Ed. programme. Second, mandatory pre-internship orientation should include model lesson demonstrations by experienced special educators, with explicit modelling of constructivist and differentiated instructional strategies. Third, institutional partnerships with practising schools should be formalised through memoranda of understanding that specify the quality of supervision, classroom allocation procedures, and the professional climate that schools are expected to provide. Fourth, practicum documentation and records should be redesigned to serve formative reflective purposes rather than bureaucratic compliance functions, reducing the mechanical character of the internship

experience documented in the present study. Fifth, special attention should be directed to enhancing the professional trust relationship between teacher educators and guide teachers, given that the inter-institutional mentorship dynamic was a significant source of unmet expectations.

Future research should employ multi-institutional longitudinal designs to examine whether expectation–perception gaps mediate longer-term outcomes such as teacher self-efficacy, retention in the profession, and quality of inclusive education provision. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) should be applied to validate the PSIS five-factor structure in independent samples, and measurement invariance testing should be conducted across demographic subgroups.

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