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Mentoring Characteristics in Doctoral Education: Perspectives of Doctoral Students and Supervisors

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Abstract

The benefits of mentoring relationships between postgraduate students and their supervisors have been reported in the literature. However, despite research on mentors' characteristics, there is a notable lack of ELT studies that give voice to both mentees and mentors. Few studies have explored the features of doctoral mentoring from both perspectives. For this reason, 55 ELT doctoral students and 18 doctoral supervisors responded to an open-ended question as part of a large-scale project. In addition, nine doctoral students and five supervisors volunteered for a follow-up semi-structured interview. Conventional content analysis of the responses to the open-ended question and the interviews demonstrated that, in the opinions of doctoral students and supervisors, a doctoral mentor should be supportive, knowledgeable, humanitarian, and available. Using directed content analysis, the identified mentoring characteristics were categorized into psychosocial, personal, and professional attributes. According to the findings, both doctoral students and supervisors prioritize psychosocial attributes, followed by personal and professional attributes, because the stressful conditions of doctoral education demand social and emotional support from doctoral mentors. This study also addresses implications for doctoral education, including how supervisors and their graduate students can effectively fulfill their respective roles.

Keywords: doctoral students, doctoral supervisors, doctoral education, mentors, mentees, mentoring characteristics

Received: July 29, 2025

Revised: November 15, 2025

Accepted: December 22, 2025

Published: March 10, 2026

Article type: Research Article

DOI: 10.22111/ijals.2026.54559.2586

Publisher: University of Sistan and Baluchestan

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How to cite: Khodabakhshi, S., & Soodmand Afshar, H. (2026). Mentoring characteristics in Doctoral education: Perspectives of Doctoral students and supervisors. *Iranian Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 18(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.22111/ijals.2026.54559.2586>

1. Introduction

Recent studies report an alarming rise in doctoral students struggling with mental health problems (Levecque et al., 2017), leading to failure to graduate (Roberts & Ferro-Almeida, 2019). More specifically, doctoral candidates studying in Iran must cope with several issues, including “mismatched supervision, vague institutional guidelines, and insufficient support” (Ghaseminangi et al., 2026, p. 2).

That is why mentoring can play a prominent role in the growth (Lyons et al., 1990) and socialization (Carpenter et al., 2015) of doctoral students, highlighting the importance of quality supervision in this regard (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2020; Ghaseminangi et al., 2026; Kordestani Moghaddam et al., 2019). Thus, effective mentoring is vital to undergraduate students’ (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2020) and graduate students’ academic achievement in general and their researcher identity improvement in particular. The mentoring relationship between graduate students and supervisors can contribute to such a triumph (Lunsford, 2012), a fundamental element of which is the friendly rapport between the mentor and the mentee (Kim, 2014).

One way to benefit from effective mentoring and avoid detrimental mentorship (Tuma et al., 2021) is to explore the qualities of doctoral mentors. To put it another way, if doctoral supervisors knew what their graduate students expected of them, they could assist them more fervently. Some attempts to identify mentors’ traits have provided valuable information (e.g., Carpintero, 2015; Heeralal, 2014). To this end, given the relevant literature on graduate mentoring and mentors’ roles and functions, the features of a mentor mentioned by the participants can be systematically categorized into educational, professional, psychosocial, and personal development attributes (Kumar & Johnson, 2017; Nguyen, 2017). However, most studies in the context of doctoral mentoring are pertinent to medical sciences or nursing studies (e.g., Ghaseminangi et al., 2026; Kordestani Moghaddam et al., 2019; Sheikhi et al., 2019), rather than to English Language Teaching (ELT). Hence, what is absent from the relevant literature is an empirical study exploring the distinctive qualities that make a doctoral supervisor a mentor in the context of higher education in general and applied linguistics in particular in Iran, from the viewpoints of not only postgraduate students but also doctoral supervisors.

This study could be beneficial for researchers intending to pursue a doctorate but hesitant about choosing the ideal supervisor (or mentor), as well as inspiring for supervisors who value altruistic teaching, i.e., teaching without focusing on the self, a type of positive psychology (Zare et al., 2023), and who would like to give voice to doctoral students’ expectations to guide them more wisely on this journey. Therefore, drawing on both doctoral students’ and supervisors’ viewpoints, the central aim of this qualitative study was to explore the distinctive features of doctoral mentors who make a considerable difference in the lives of their graduate students serving as mentees. The researchers also sought to identify the mentoring features that contributed most to doctoral

students' perceptions of their supervisors as mentors. Attempting to extend the theoretical framework used to systematically categorize mentoring features was, in fact, the ultimate goal.

The following research questions thus guided this qualitative study:

1. In doctoral students' and supervisors' opinions, what (mentoring) characteristics make a doctoral supervisor a mentor?
2. Which mentoring characteristics most contributed to doctoral students' perceptions of their supervisors as mentors?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mentoring or Mentorship

The origin of mentoring dates back to Greek mythology, when Odysseus appeals to Mentor (i.e., his friend and advisor) to help him take the necessary steps for the Trojan War and take good care of his son (Cruz et al., 2020).

Mentorship is deemed to be a multidimensional process (Carpenter et al., 2015; Lammert et al., 2020) with diverse meanings in the literature (Vance et al., 2017). Accordingly, different researchers have defined this term mainly as an effective, interpersonal, and long-term relationship between an expert (i.e., an experienced person, such as the mentor) and a novice (i.e., a less experienced person, the mentee) (see Heeralal, 2014; Lyons et al., 1990).

It is imperative to briefly discuss relational mentoring versus traditional mentoring. Relational mentoring emphasizes mutual and reciprocal mentoring relationships rather than one-sided ones, in which both mentees and mentors can learn and develop (Ragins, 2011). Correspondingly, in their study, Al Makhamreh and Stockley (2020) identify three levels of mentoring quality in doctoral education: authentic, average, and below-average or toxic mentoring. In line with relational mentoring, authentic mentoring encompasses five features: presence and engagement, sincere interest, confidence and mindfulness, space for growth, and positivity (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2020). Finally, they argue that doctoral students' performance and well-being can be influenced by the quality of mentoring they receive, with authentic mentorship having the greatest impact.

2.2. Essential Qualities of a Mentor

Beyene et al. (2002, as cited in Cruz et al., 2020) hold that mentees prefer to benefit from person-oriented mentors who are open and friendly and have a sense of humor rather than those who solely care about content knowledge; consequently, mentors' personal traits, including communication and interpersonal skills, are regarded as decisive factors underlying their students' professional development (Nguyen, 2017).

Correspondingly, other studies report such characteristics of a mentor as availability; openly sharing knowledge and experience; being a good communicator and listener; having contact with faculty members; being motivating; intending to make a change or a difference; being willing to spare time for their students; and reaching out to their mentees without waiting for their phone calls or messages (Akili, 2013, as cited in Carpintero, 2015).

As stated earlier, since numerous doctoral students start a doctorate but never finish it, quality mentoring relationships portrayed by mentors' tough love—being benevolent, reliable, honest, competent, and demanding—could come to the rescue (Roberts & Ferro-Almeida, 2019). To this end, the researchers interviewed 21 effective doctoral mentors in the U.S. to learn about the interpersonal skills that aid them in being effective and identified the following features: benevolence (i.e., having their students' interests at heart and being supportive, caring, available, and empathetic), being good listeners and communicators, having high expectations, collaboration, honesty (i.e., being open, responsible, authentic, and trustworthy), patience and flexibility, and respectfulness. Roberts and Ferro-Almeida (2019) also concluded that effective mentors were trustworthy, capable of creating relationships outside academia, and realistic about time.

In essence, a good mentor should, first and foremost, be an effective teacher; for this reason, the following memorable quote aptly illustrates a mentor's distinguishing characteristics: before ruling students' minds, a successful teacher or mentor should first capture their hearts.

2.3. Mentors' or Mentoring Roles

Apart from mentors' characteristics, several studies have proposed mentors' roles or functions, confirming that these roles are personally and professionally fulfilling for teachers (Simpson et al., 2007).

Carpenter et al. (2015) and Terry and Ghosh (2015) both discuss Kram's (1985) theory of mentoring roles to make sense of mentoring at the PhD level; thus, mentors' functions can be categorized into two broad dimensions: career and psychosocial facets. Whereas the latter assists individuals in developing feelings of effectiveness and confidence, the former concerns guidance on learning about their environment and preparing for opportunities to make progress (Carpenter et al., 2015).

In addition, Kumar and Johnson (2017) maintain that, notwithstanding the variety in the terms supervisor, advisor, and mentor, researchers have reached a consensus on the premise that graduate mentoring consists of three types of development: educational development, which involves advising mentees on how to plan their academic programs, teaching them formally and informally, and providing opportunities for academic growth; professional development, which involves offering guidance about what is expected in the discipline and providing access to resources and opportunities for professional and research development; and psychosocial development, which involves providing the social and emotional support needed for mentees' professional and

academic growth and encouraging reflection on personal strengths and weaknesses while developing academically.

After scrutinizing the relevant literature, it is evident that most studies on mentors' characteristics, functions, or roles have been conducted primarily in occupational contexts, teacher mentoring, or disciplines outside doctoral ELT. Moreover, a comparison of the cited articles reveals that mentors and, particularly, mentees recognize a mixture of different mentoring characteristics, functions, or roles, such as a hybrid of professional, educational, and personal development features, with the last category mainly involving communication skills, in Akili's (2013, as cited in Carpintero, 2015) study and a mixture of personal, psychosocial, and professional development features, with a primary emphasis on psychological development, in Roberts and Ferro-Almeida's (2019) study. On the other hand, some studies largely prioritized personal traits, such as Beyene et al. (2002, as cited in Cruz et al., 2020). As a result, given the current challenges and difficulties encountered by doctoral students in any discipline and country, particularly in ELT and Iran (Ghaseminangi et al., 2026; Levecque et al., 2017; Roberts & Ferro-Almeida, 2019), the need to avoid negative or detrimental mentoring (Tuma, 2021) and decrease graduate students' dissatisfaction with their supervisors (Kordestani Moghaddam et al., 2019) makes an exploration of doctoral mentoring characteristics in light of relational mentoring increasingly important. Next, it would be worthwhile to gain more insight into doctoral students' and supervisors' perspectives on mentoring features and whether there are similarities or differences in their preferences. Finally, due to incomplete details about the educational, professional, personal, and psychosocial development of doctoral mentors, extending the theoretical framework could be another motive for conducting this study.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design. Specifically, it followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) view of qualitative research as a tool for exploring and understanding participants' meanings. An exploratory qualitative design, using open-ended survey responses and semi-structured interviews, guided our exploration of doctoral mentors' characteristics. The main reason for choosing this design was its appropriateness when a phenomenon has not received adequate attention and there is a need to understand the participants' points of view more deeply (Stebbins, 2001).

3.2. Participants and Setting

Since the researchers were only looking for doctoral students and supervisors in ELT, purposive sampling was used for this qualitative study, followed by volunteer sampling. Fifty-five

doctoral students or candidates in ELT (20 males and 35 females) answered an open-ended question; furthermore, nine (i.e., five females and four males) volunteered to attend the semi-structured interviews held online (N=7) or in person (N=2). Eight of the doctoral students were studying at different state universities, and one was studying at a nonprofit private university in Iran. They were aged 26 to 43.

Eighteen doctoral faculty members (12 males and 6 females) answered an open-ended question. Five male mentors volunteered for online (N=4) or in-person (N=1) follow-up semi-structured interviews. These five supervisors, aged 45 to 64, had at least ten years of collegial teaching experience. They were full, associate, or assistant professors teaching at state universities (N=4) and a nonprofit private university (N=1) in Iran. No relationship was established between the first researcher and the participants before the study's commencement.

Informed consent to participate in this study, including the survey and follow-up interviews, was obtained from all participants.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection and analysis were conducted in two phases. In phase one, an open-ended question, which was part of a self-designed five-point Likert-scale questionnaire, was purposively administered to both ELT supervisors and doctoral students, asking them whether they believed that they or their supervisors were mentors and to list, in descending order, five distinguishing characteristics that convinced them to consider themselves or their supervisors mentors. Many doctoral mentoring characteristics continued to emerge one after another.

In phase two, to gain greater depth and triangulate the data as much as possible, participants who had mostly depicted their supervisors as mentors in the questionnaire voluntarily attended follow-up semi-structured interviews (i.e., part of the large-scale project), either in person at their universities or workplaces or online at home or work through Google Meet with minimal disturbance. The interview questions were prepared by the first author, grounded in the relevant literature, and checked by a PhD holder. Although the interview process took around five minutes, all participants were free to explain and discuss the issue further, as desired, without any restrictions; more specifically, the interview was only a portion of a lengthier interview from the large-scale study and was conducted to deepen and triangulate the findings obtained through the open-ended question. The first researcher conducted, video-recorded, and transcribed all the interviews. The first researcher was a language instructor and PhD candidate who was engaged in completing her dissertation at the time of this study. As a result, even though she was aware of the need to prevent bias or personal interests from affecting the interview process, she kept them under control through reflexivity, that is, the recognition that qualitative authors cannot separate themselves from their writing, how readers receive it, or how it influences the sites and participants in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

It should be mentioned here that the data were gathered in accordance with all research ethics and institutional guidelines.

3.4. Data Analysis

A conventional content analysis, i.e., codes derived from the data, or inductive content analysis, was adopted for the first phase, as we intended to identify doctoral mentoring characteristics based on the viewpoints of doctoral students and supervisors (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For data analysis, the data were initially read several times in MAXQDA 2018 to achieve a sense of immersion. Then, the exact words that seemingly encompassed the key concepts were highlighted. After that, the first researcher identified those characteristics that were either frequently named or reflected more than one key concept. First, in the doctoral students' opinions, 40 codes were recognized, which were reduced to 20 based on frequency. For instance, being knowledgeable was the second most frequent code, which emerged from some of the following subcodes: possesses up-to-date knowledge in the field, knowledgeable, being knowledgeable, expertise and knowledge, high knowledge, and knowing their field very well. Second, based on the perspectives of the doctoral supervisors and bearing in mind the smaller sample, only 22 codes were recognized. For example, being helpful/supportive was the most frequent code and emerged from the following subcodes: helpful, helping people feel at peace with research, supportive, helping them discover for themselves, cooperative, and providing support and guidance.

A directed content analysis, i.e., codes derived from theory, or deductive content analysis, guided the second phase of analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). After recognizing the doctoral mentoring characteristics, the researchers sought to categorize them under key categories to be able to fathom the phenomenon at hand more distinctly, in addition to determining whether there were any similarities or differences between doctoral students' and supervisors' viewpoints. Moreover, the researchers intended to extend the professional, psychosocial, educational, and personal development of doctoral mentors. For data analysis, the different types of development, along with their definitions or explanations, were provided separately and studied carefully. Later, the first researcher categorized the characteristics into attributes. This step was repeated a few times to avoid any mistakes. For further illustration, doctoral mentoring traits such as being friendly, helpful or supportive, available, and humanitarian were classified as psychosocial development due to the emotional and social bulwark necessary for mentees. Mentoring features such as building rapport, being knowledgeable or up-to-date, and giving (constructive) feedback were categorized as professional development. Lastly, mentoring characteristics such as being dedicated/hardworking, flexible, and patient were categorized as personal development.

As common features repeatedly emerged over time, the data reached saturation. The carefully transcribed texts were discussed with the participants through Telegram in cases of ambiguity. The first researcher also shared and discussed the final interpretations of the findings

with the participants, and several participants offered comments that assisted in clarifying and refining the interpretations. For instance, one of the participants believed that although responsibility might be a personal attribute, it also concerns the professional attributes of a doctoral mentor. Member checking can provide an opportunity to clarify and refine interpretations rather than merely having all participants corroborate the findings; as a result, involving the participants in data interpretation enhances the trustworthiness of the findings (Birt et al., 2016).

A sample of the responses to the open-ended question (N= 6), as well as the interviews (N =3; seven paragraphs), was coded by another doctoral candidate according to the codebook. As a result, the intercoder agreement for each section, i.e., coding the answers to the open-ended question and the interviews for both groups and classifying each subcode under a parent code, was 100%, 100%, 89%, and 90.90%, respectively, with a mean of 94.97%. According to Miles et al. (2014), an average agreement ranging from 85% to 90% is acceptable.

Despite debate about the use of checklists in qualitative inquiry, COREQ (Tong et al., 2007) remains a tool that is frequently employed in qualitative studies. We also benefited from the COREQ checklist as a guiding framework to enhance both methodological integrity and transparency while being cognizant of its critiques (Buus et al., 2025). All the measures above, including intercoder agreement, member checking, and the COREQ checklist, were taken to address researcher bias, ensure the proper representation of participants, and establish truthfulness as much as possible (Hoang, 2024).

4. Findings and Discussion

The responses to the open-ended question and the semi-structured interviews were analyzed to explore the most common doctoral mentoring characteristics, any similarities or differences in participants' opinions, and the mentoring features contributing to doctoral students' perceptions of their supervisors as mentors. Finally, some valuable contributions to the literature are discussed. Owing to ethical considerations, pseudonyms were used, and titles are included only as a sign of respect.

4.1. The Most Common Characteristics of Doctoral Mentoring

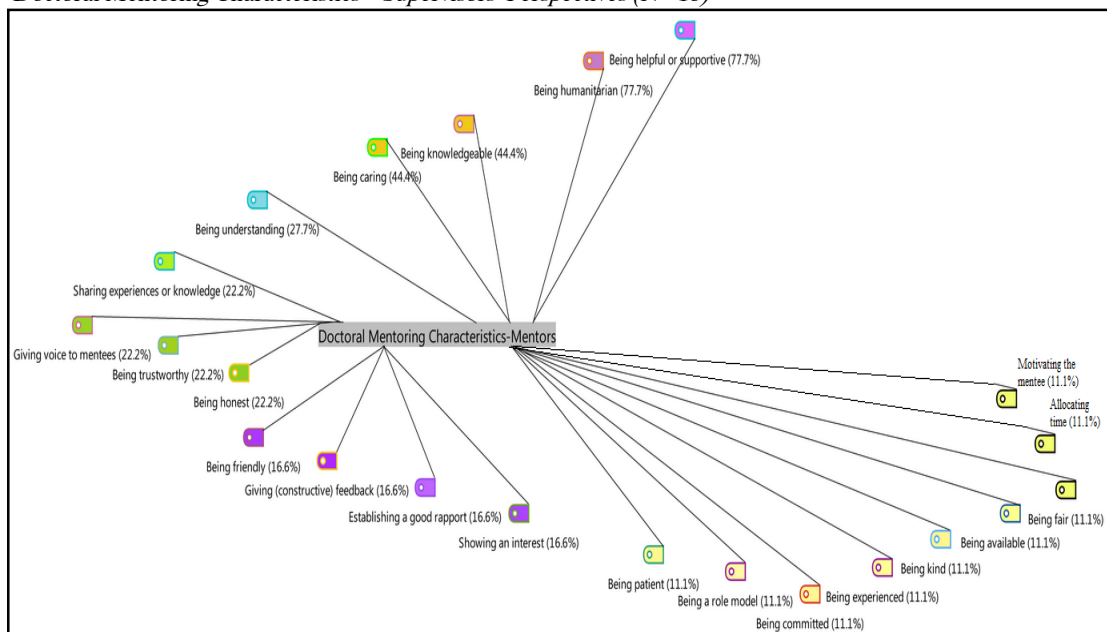
To answer the first research question, i.e., what (mentoring) characteristics make a doctoral supervisor a mentor, conventional content analysis was employed to analyze the responses to the open-ended question and the interviews with doctoral students and supervisors (see Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 1 and 2 below). Owing to the small sample of doctoral supervisors, the interpretations should be considered with caution. Some features had the same frequency; hence, they were grouped in the same box.

Table 1*Doctoral Mentoring Characteristics, Students' Perspectives (N=55)*

Being helpful or supportive
Being knowledgeable
Being available
Being kind; Being trustworthy
Giving (constructive) feedback
Being caring; Building up rapport
Allocating time; Motivating the mentee; Being patient
Being flexible; Being humanitarian; Being professional
Being meticulous; Being hardworking; Being responsible; Being punctual
Being a role model; Being friendly

Figure 1*Doctoral Mentoring Characteristics—Doctoral Students' Perspectives (N=55)***Table 2***Doctoral Mentoring Characteristics—Supervisors' Perspectives (N=18)*

Being helpful or supportive; Being humanitarian
Being knowledgeable; Being caring
Being understanding
Giving voice to mentees; Sharing experience or knowledge; Being honest; Being trustworthy
Being friendly; Giving (constructive) feedback; Establishing a good rapport; Showing an interest
Being patient; Being a role model; Being committed; Being experienced; Being fair; Being kind; Being available; Allocating time; Motivating the mentee

Figure 2*Doctoral Mentoring Characteristics—Supervisors' Perspectives (N=18)*

Intriguingly, as Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, 13 of the features were common to the two groups; nonetheless, in doctoral students' or mentees' opinions, a mentor should be helpful or supportive, knowledgeable, available, kind, and trustworthy, whereas being helpful, humanitarian, knowledgeable, and caring matters most to doctoral supervisors. Makan (all names are pseudonyms), one of the doctoral students who participated in this study, briefly mentioned being helpful or supportive, describing it as "being there for their students; this is the most important one." Concerning being knowledgeable, Ilia, another participant, believed that "knowing their field very well and being able to take the route wherein you can achieve your goals, either educational or research goals, and here the professor's attitude towards the route the postgraduate student is traversing can really affect their attitude." Regarding being available, Diana believed that "a mentor should be a person as a supervisor who can supervise you, [and] who can, who can be reachable; these two are very important viewpoints." Lastly, Mona indirectly suggested that mentors should build good rapport with their graduate students in a friendly way so that students feel at ease asking questions.

On the other hand, according to doctoral supervisors, being helpful/supportive and humanitarian were the most frequently mentioned characteristics. For instance, Dr. Shams, one of the study's doctoral supervisors, briefly stated that "kindness, helpfulness, patience, these are . . . very important." Dr. Rastegar and Dr. Nikzad pointed out the humanitarian feature by stating that "as I said, respect is a huge[ly] important point" and "the gate into entering whatever stuff you're doing at the university . . . is to have moral standards for yourself," respectively. Dr. Nikzad also stressed that being knowledgeable is essential and that, for this, "you need to have expert

knowledge; you need to be an expert who knows everything, I mean in the field.” When Dr. Harandi was naming the characteristics of a doctoral mentor, he talked about trustworthiness as follows: “Lastly, trust, I mean, building a trusting relationship that fosters open communication.” Dr. Marani indirectly pointed out showing an interest as follows: “A teacher cannot be a successful teacher just by loving the subject matter; in addition to loving the subject matter, you need to love your students, you need to love teaching, you need to love your job.”

Some features might overlap conceptually across the core attributes of mentoring; nevertheless, they were classified under the category that best represented their main function from the participants' viewpoints. What mattered most to the doctoral students was that they were looking for a doctoral mentor who primarily possessed psychosocial (N=10) and personal (N=7), as well as professional (N=2), attributes. As a result, personal and especially psychosocial attributes mattered most to doctoral students. During member checking, all participants concurred with the final interpretations, and one participant shared a recent experience in which she chose her supervisor because of his reputation for sympathy and support, confirming that psychosocial attributes are the most important. Another doctoral student endorsed the findings by maintaining that, since doctoral students are usually academically autonomous and involved in familial, occupational, and, more importantly, academic responsibilities, they strongly need their doctoral mentors to support them mentally and socially during article publication and dissertation completion, refrain from imposing dissertation topics, and so forth. In other words, in terms of psychosocial attributes, emotional and social support for doctoral mentees can be offered by someone who is helpful/supportive, available, kind, caring, and humanitarian; allocates time to their mentees; motivates the mentee; builds rapport; and serves as a role model. Next, the personal attributes necessary for a doctoral mentor could include being dedicated or hardworking, flexible, friendly, meticulous, patient, punctual, responsible, and trustworthy. Besides psychosocial and personal attributes, professional attributes include providing constructive feedback and being knowledgeable.

Having said that, from doctoral supervisors' perspectives, a doctoral supervisor can be considered a mentor if they possess and assist mentees primarily through psychosocial (N=13), professional (N=5), and personal (N=4) attributes. To be more specific, psychosocial attributes are also of paramount importance to doctoral supervisors, with the only discrepancy being that professional and personal attributes show fairly equal importance. Hence, in addition to the features mentioned above in doctoral students' opinions, psychosocial attributes also include being understanding, showing an interest, and giving voice to mentees. Additionally, professional attributes encompass sharing experience or knowledge, being committed, and being experienced, while personal attributes involve being honest, trustworthy, patient, and fair.

While our findings align with and extend those of Carpenter et al. (2015), Kumar and Johnson (2017), and Terry and Ghosh (2015), particularly regarding the classification of features such as availability, supportiveness, and caring as psychosocial attributes, Roberts and Ferro-

Almeida (2019) categorized the same features under benevolence, which is the first quality in tough love theory. Furthermore, being supportive or helpful and being humanitarian appear to be the most important characteristics to doctoral students and supervisors, which does not echo Roberts and Ferro-Almeida's (2019) finding that being trustworthy, capable of creating relationships outside academia, and realistic about time are qualities that effective mentors value in their relationships. Moreover, although being supportive or helpful was one of the most common characteristics and aligns with the first feature, i.e., presence and engagement, identified by Al Makhamreh and Stockley (2020) for authentic mentoring, the other common characteristics are only partially consistent with sincere interest, confidence and mindfulness, space for growth, and positivity in terms of their order or significance.

The findings of this study mirror those of Beyene et al. (2002, as cited in Cruz et al., 2020) and Nguyen (2017), emphasizing that a supervisor cannot act as a mentor solely through content knowledge, as personal features also play a vital role. Furthermore, the findings echo those of Akili (2013, as cited in Carpintero, 2015) and Heeralal (2014), holding that availability, sharing knowledge or experience, and being knowledgeable are essential elements for a mentor. Intriguingly, the fact that a mentor not only needs to fulfill the educational needs of their mentees but should also act as a professional and psychosocial shelter aligns closely with Hall et al.'s (2008) results, which state that teacher educators agree on the professional role of mentors rather than their merely acting as cooperating teachers.

The reason why both doctoral students' and supervisors' perspectives on doctoral mentoring characteristics pivot on psychosocial attributes, followed by personal and professional attributes, might be the negative mental conditions associated with doctoral education in general and the PhD in Iran in particular. On the one hand, since these students face mental health problems (Levecque et al., 2017), inadequate support, improper supervision, publication pressure resulting in structural tensions, gender discrepancies in institutional support and supervision (Ghaseminangi et al., 2026), and dissatisfaction with their supervisors owing to their unavailability and lack of support (Kordestani Moghaddam et al., 2019), they do not merely seek an academic relationship but view a doctoral mentor as someone who advocates for them socially and psychologically. On the other hand, doctoral supervisors who have themselves gone through serious upheavals are cognizant of the need for psychosocial, personal, and professional attributes. Moreover, psychosocial attributes aside, doctoral students also value personal attributes and regard them as vital for mentoring, demonstrating that effective doctoral mentoring might rely not only on what mentors do but also on who they are, necessitating the possession or fostering of certain personal attributes, such as dedication, flexibility, friendliness, meticulousness, patience, punctuality, a sense of responsibility, and trustworthiness, to be perceived as effective doctoral mentors.

These differing priorities in mentoring attributes reveal that while doctoral supervisors might place more emphasis on professional guidance and competence alongside emotional and social protection, doctoral students prioritize psychosocial support, such as accessibility and

humanitarianism, above all else, along with a mentor's personal attributes, such as flexibility, dedication, and punctuality. In such a climate, if a supervisor assumes that their graduate students need constructive feedback and research guidance while the students seek psychosocial support, patience, and availability, a mismatch between their expectations may occur, potentially resulting in decreased satisfaction with the mentoring relationship.

This study contributes to the literature by complementing and extending the frameworks of graduate mentoring or, more accurately, doctoral mentoring. As stated previously, doctoral mentoring encompasses educational, psychosocial, and professional development (Kumar & Johnson, 2017), with our study adding another component, namely, personal attributes, and excluding educational development. The participants may not have deemed educational attributes particularly important because a supervisor, especially one employing mentoring strategies, must already possess the educational development necessary to supervise a doctoral student effectively. Additionally, our findings suggest that doctoral students, especially in Iran, do not perceive mentoring merely in terms of mentoring functions (e.g., psychosocial, educational, and professional); they also value mentors' personal attributes. Table 3 shows the three core attributes of doctoral mentoring (in ELT) and the features of each, providing more specific and systematic information about the characteristics of doctoral mentoring. Due to the small sample of supervisors, their perspectives were excluded from the doctoral mentoring framework reported in Table 3.

Table 3

Mentoring Characteristics Identified by Doctoral Students in ELT

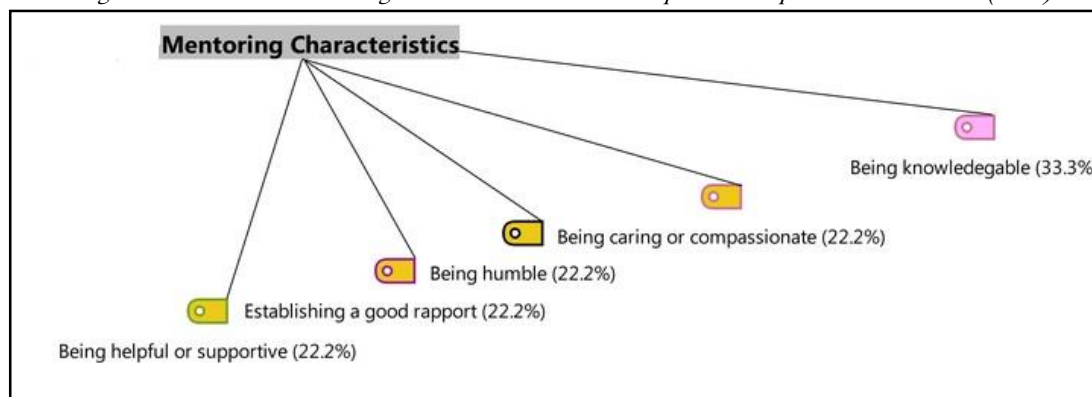
Doctoral mentoring (in ELT)		
Personal attributes	Psychosocial attributes	Professional attributes
<i>Being dedicated/hardworking</i>	<i>Being helpful/supportive</i>	<i>Giving constructive feedback</i>
<i>Being flexible</i>	<i>Being available/accessible</i>	<i>Being knowledgeable</i>
<i>Being meticulous</i>	<i>Being kind</i>	
<i>Being patient</i>	<i>Being caring</i>	
<i>Being punctual</i>	<i>Being humanitarian</i>	
<i>Being responsible</i>	<i>Being friendly</i>	
<i>Being trustworthy</i>	<i>Allocating time to mentees</i>	
	<i>Motivating the mentees</i>	
	<i>Building up a rapport</i>	
	<i>Being a role model</i>	

4.2. Mentoring Characteristics Contributing the Most to Doctoral Students' Perceptions of Their Supervisors as Mentors

To answer the second research question, i.e., which mentoring characteristics contributed most to doctoral students' perceptions of their supervisors as mentors, the conventional content analysis of the interviews yielded five mentoring features, as demonstrated in Table 4 and Figure 3. Owing to the small sample of doctoral students who participated in the interviews, the percentages should be interpreted with caution.

Table 4*Mentoring characteristics contributing to doctoral students' perceptions of supervisors as mentors (N=9)*

Being knowledgeable
Being caring or compassionate; Being humble; Establishing a good rapport; Being helpful or supportive

Figure 3*Mentoring Characteristics Contributing to Doctoral Students' Perceptions of Supervisors as Mentors (N=9)*

The thorough knowledge of their supervisors was the characteristic most frequently mentioned by the graduate students. Farzin, one of the participants, thought that his supervisor's "deep knowledge in the field" had been so helpful that he had been able to tolerate other things. Being caring or deeply compassionate is a distinctive characteristic of a mentor because it allows students to know that their supervisors, first and foremost, care about and sympathize with them. More specifically, when asked which mentoring feature made them perceive their supervisors as mentors, Sohrab replied, "Caring for my feelings, caring for my health, and then caring for every single detail of my study," and Kimia implied, "I realize he values me; he is aware of my feelings; even if I don't say anything, he'll notice that." Makan also thought that "when I see my supervisor understands the difficulties, the struggles that I have been going through, not only in my academic life but also in my personal life, it is very stress-relieving." Moreover, when a person is caring and compassionate, they can also be helpful or supportive. In this regard, Kiana believed that her mentor was supportive because he constantly kept in contact with her. Another point is that, according to Elena, another participant, despite all the accomplishments in doctoral students' academic lives, being humble had influenced them and acted as an incentive to do the same in the future, as their role models had done. On the other hand, developing good rapport or possessing good communication skills can have a considerable impact on doctoral students, a feature that is critical in the mentoring relationship (Kim, 2014).

A reanalysis of the mentoring characteristics that led doctoral supervisors to be perceived as mentors by their doctoral students reveals that, among these five features, three belong to psychosocial attributes (e.g., being helpful or supportive, being caring or compassionate, and establishing good rapport), whereas only one belongs to personal attributes (e.g., being humble)

and another to professional attributes (e.g., being knowledgeable). Once more, the significance of social and emotional support from doctoral mentors is unveiled. Therefore, the findings suggest that doctoral supervisors should primarily enhance their psychosocial skills, apart from attempting to hone their personal and professional attributes.

Overall, the findings once more echo the importance of relational mentoring versus traditional mentoring (Ragins, 2011), in addition to pursuing altruistic teaching (Zare et al., 2023) and authentic mentoring (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2020), as the way a supervisor, as a mentor, treats a student and the mentoring practices they employ can lead to a unique experience during this journey and (re)shape the student's researcher identity. Additionally, a mentee can receive the most substantial benefits from a mentoring relationship during identity development (Johnson, 2007, as cited in Palmer et al., 2015; Lunsford, 2012). For further illustration, being knowledgeable and humble aligns with what the doctoral students in Al Makhamreh and Stockley's (2020) study argued: their supervisors were confident and mindful of their own limits, believing that they did not have all the answers.

6. Conclusion

Undergraduate students' success and graduate students' impressive academic achievement, in tandem with their researcher identity development, owe much to effective mentoring (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2020). Such accomplishments can be achieved through doctoral students' mentoring relationships with their supervisors (Lunsford, 2012), at the heart of which is the friendly rapport between mentors and their mentees (Kim, 2014). To consider another scenario, a doctoral mentor who is supportive, knowledgeable, humanitarian, available, caring, kind, and trustworthy, provides feedback, and builds rapport can be a significant asset to the academic world, particularly to doctoral students.

This study carries implications for doctoral education, especially for novice and experienced doctoral supervisors seeking ways to hone their supervisory skills or become aware of doctoral students' expectations of their supervisors as mentors, thereby turning these insights into influential mentoring practices to better support their graduate students. The findings of our study revealed that doctoral mentoring is not merely the transfer of knowledge and virtuosity but also a relational process; hence, supervisor training and faculty development programs should not only concentrate on publication, academic guidance, and research methodology but also cover skills such as active listening, accessibility, building good rapport, building trust, and empathy. On the other hand, when doctoral students are engaged in a stressful, competitive milieu characterized by publication pressure and a lack of support, relational mentoring based on psychosocial support can reduce feelings of isolation, promote students' motivation and stability, diminish academic exhaustion, and enhance the quality of the doctoral experience. Finally, we encourage doctoral students and supervisors to share their attitudes toward the features of doctoral mentoring.

The researchers faced several limitations during this research. First, since doctoral supervisors have hectic schedules and doctoral students are heavily engaged in responsibilities, it was quite challenging for them to participate in academic research, but those who did are greatly appreciated. Therefore, due to the small sample size of doctoral supervisors, the single-country context, and the cross-sectional study design, generalizability to other contexts and populations should be approached with caution. Second, although gender was not a criterion for participant selection in this study, the gender distribution of the participants, particularly the lack of female supervisors in the follow-up interviews, may not fully represent female supervisors' perspectives in the findings. As a result, although many doctoral supervisors in Iran appear to be male, further qualitative research could investigate the probable similarities and differences between male and female supervisors' viewpoints on doctoral mentoring characteristics.

Finally, while doctoral supervisors play a key role in (re)constructing their students' identities, the focus could shift to doctoral mentees themselves, exploring the probable features of these students so that they can make a good first impression on their supervisors, thereby motivating them to mentor their mentees both implicitly and explicitly during the doctoral journey.

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