IMPROVING PRIMARY TEACHER EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS THROUGH PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PEDAGOGICAL VOICES

ÖĞRETMEN ADAYLARININ PEDAGOJİK SESLERİ ARACILIĞIYLA
İLKÖĞRETİM BÖLÜMLERİNİN GELİŞTİRİLMESİ

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ÖZ

Öğretmenlik mesleği üzerine yapılan birçok araştırma, doğası gereği bu mesleğin oldukça zor olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu zor meslek, öğretmen adaylarının ilköğretim bölümü hakkında neler düşündükleri konusunda dikkatli bir incelemeyi de gerektirmektedir. Araştırma, ilköğretim bölümü sınıf öğretmenliği programındaki öğretmen adaylarının programa kabul edilmesinden iki ay sonra yapılmış olup, bir grup öğretmen adayının eğitim hakkındaki ilk düşüncelerini incelemiştir. Veriler ise grup görüşme metoduyla toplanmış, araştırmaya katılım tamamen gönüllük esasına dayandırılmıştır. Veriler, nitel analiz yardımıyla işleme tabi tutulmuştur. Adayların pedagojik sesleri, öğretmen eğitiminde etkili bir öğretmen olabilmek için ne bekledikleri ve nelerle karşılaştıkları arasında "boşluk" olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Bölüm Geliştirme, Sınıf Öğretmeni Adayı, Pedagojik Ses, Nitel Araştırma

ABSTRACT

A growing body of studies into the job of teaching has described it as an overwhelmingly demanding task due to its very nature. This demanding job requires, among many others, a careful consideration of the issue of what the candidate owners think of the department of primary teacher education. This study, undertaken when a group of pre-service primary teachers were undergoing their initial professional education in the department of primary teacher education after two months of recruitment, investigated their initial views of teacher education. The data were collected through group interviews conducted entirely on a voluntary-basis then processed by means of qualitative analysis. The student teachers' pedagogical voices indicated that there were "gaps" between what they expected and what they faced in their initial teacher training courses in order to become effective teachers.

Key Words: Department Improvement, Pre-Service Primary Teachers, Pedagogical Voices, Qualitative Research.

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INTRODUCTION

The point of departure in this study is that we, as teacher educators, can develop a teacher training department better if we listen to the voices of its customers. The purpose of this study is to raise the pedagogical voices of student teachers during their initial experiences in the teaching profession. In the related literature, "voices" have been used actively and productively by various scholars in various contexts to achieve different purposes (e.g. Clandinin, 1992; Day, 1999; Elbaz, 1991; Jensen, Foster & Eddy, 1997; Rudduck, Chaplain & Wallace, 1996; Sugrue, 1999). For experienced teachers, Elbaz (1991, p. 1), for example, argues that "voices" are "always used against the background of a previous silence, and [thus] it is a political usage as well as epistemological one". In a school improvement effort by primary school pupils, Rudduct, Chaplain and Wallace (1996, p.1) state that "what pupils say about teaching, learning and schooling is not only worth listening to but [also] provides an important-perhaps the most important-foundation for thinking about ways of improving schools." In the same vein, in the sociology of pupils' schooling culture, Hammersley and Woods (1984) stress the importance of pupils' own interpretations of school experiences, as follows:

> There can be little doubt that pupils' own interpretations of school processes represent a crucial link in the educational chain. Unless we understand how pupils respond to different forms of pedagogy and school organization and why they respond in the ways that they do, our efforts to increase the effectiveness, or to change the impact, of schooling will stand little chance of success (p. 3).

Voices are also used in the context of student teachers' lay theories of teaching so as to explore them, and thus create a basis for improving them (Sugrue, 1996). Similarly, in the context of this study, "voices" are used both for the purpose of raising student teachers' concerns and views about previous silence, and for improving teaching and learning offered to them by a department of teacher training so that the department can one way or another be improved. In short, in this study as well as in the related literature, voices are used metaphorically in various contexts to address various issues.

There are at least two ways of improving an organization (e.g. a teacher education department); in the organizational culture and by managing the change process. The most dominant way is that the organization is to have a shared understanding and aim of meeting the needs of its customers. Shared understanding and goals can be seen in a strong organizational culture (e.g. Fullan, 1991; 1992; Hargreaves, 1997; Meyerson & Martin, 1997; Stool & Fink, 1996). It is believed that a shared aim offers a means of developing an organization through its customers' voices. A certain amount of vision is required to provide the clarity for promoting student teachers' learning which

in turn leads to organizational development. It is also believed that if the student teachers participate either directly or indirectly in the process of designing a program of study or they have voices on it, then they will probably have a clearer sense of what they are required to be as qualified teachers. The second way is the management of the change process effectively in an organization by the participation of all (e.g. heads, teachers, students, parents). Fullan (1991; 1992) argues that if an organization undertakes effective planning, implementing it, and so coping with change, it will be highly successful.

It appears that little is known systematically about the voices of student teachers in order to improve primary teacher education departments; their concerns about why they choose teaching as a profession, what they expect, and what they face in pre-service teacher education in order to be a part of the teaching profession.

This study, in fact, was prompted by a conversation between a teacher educator and the student teachers (around 300 in number) who were in the pre-service primary teacher education department. The conversation took place in their course called, "An Introduction to the Teaching Profession". The nature of the conversation was about why they chose teaching as a profession. This led to a second conversation about their initial experiences on the primary teacher education course to become effective teachers. These two conversations motivated the teacher educator to conduct an investigation into a group of volunteer student teachers to address four main questions. The first question is: What factors influenced them in choosing the teaching profession? The second, how much were they satisfied with the course which was offered them? The third, what sort of teachers do they want to be? The fourth, what do they think about how best learning can take place, and accordingly, how teaching could be provided?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Particularly, in the last two decades, there has been an increasing awareness that the teaching profession is a demanding job due to its very nature (e.g. Furlong *et al.* 2000; Hirst, 1996; Johnson, 1997; Hoyle & John, 1995). It has been shown by research into teaching since the late 1960s that different accounts of what is involved in becoming an effective teacher have been offered (Johnson, 1997). Its complex nature is due to the fact that teachers have to deal with unpredictable courses of action which generally emerge from the immediacy of classrooms (Ekiz, 2001), and yet there are no "ready-made-recipes" or "scientific principles" (Schön, 1983, 1987) for every kind of classroom action. It can be put forward that if there are not established specific scientific principles in teaching to be followed in a step by step manner, then it is crucial for teacher education departments to provide student

teachers with what is necessary for the teaching profession, among many others, through their pedagogical voices, so that a shared understanding of teaching and learning can be offered.

From the perspective of the student teacher, it has been argued that "teaching and learning about teaching are demanding tasks because they centre on complex, interrelated sets of thoughts and actions, all of which may be approached in a number of ways" (Loughran, 1996; p. 3). One of the approaches taken here is that before their participation in a primary teacher education program, the student teachers each have their own diverse experiences and interrelated sets of thoughts, and often incoherent ideas about educational theories and methods for teaching which affect how they are going to be teachers (e.g. Francis, 1995; Kagan, 1992; Sugrue, 1996; Tillema & Knol, 1997). Thus, it is important to have a picture of what their voices about pedagogy are. This is because, some argue, teacher education programs are rarely related to student teachers' beliefs and conceptions concerning teaching (Tillema & Knol, 1997).

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Currently, the initial primary teacher education program is provided by university teacher education departments via a four-year course. A student who wants to be a teacher has to take a university entrance examination after, usually, three years of high school. This examination is based on a multiple-choice test that defines the future of candidates. They are provided with the opportunity to choose a profession from 18 choices. University candidates are placed in a university or in a teacher education department by the test scores they take from the university entrance examination. In short, the university entrance examination determines which professions students will enter. Having passed this examination, student teachers, the participants in this study, are accepted by the primary teacher education department.

METHOD OF THE STUDY

This study provides insights into the pedagogical voices of student teachers on a variety of issues in their initial teacher education course. It gives space to pre-service teachers' initial experiences of teacher education in an undergraduate, primary teacher education program during the academic term 2004-2005. The data were collected from 23 student teachers through "group interviews" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) two months after the start of the course. The following specific questions formed the basis of the study: Why did the student teachers choose teaching as a profession? What were their expectations from the department of education and accordingly, what did they face?, What do they think of how to learn best? What do they think about how to be effective teachers?

In order to explore their views on these questions, a group of them (5 to 7) were interviewed in each session. Each interview took approximately two and a half hours. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended in nature. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. However, it should be noted that not all of the 23 student teachers' views are used in this study, but rather the most illustrative of them are presented. Analysis was mainly processed by grounded constructs, meaning that conceptions and views were captured in particular phases that the student teachers generated (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Woods, 1996). Although group interviews were conducted, each student teacher's views were treated individually during the analysis. In other words, each student teacher was approached as a case, and thus his/her views examined separately in the initial analysis.

At the preliminary stage of the analysis, the data were categorized by coding the student teachers' views into as many categories as possible. This process is called "open coding". Then, their views were placed into categories that showed the properties of initially-identified categories. In the last stage of the analysis, categories and properties were integrated into the general categories. This stage is called "data reduction" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, during the interviews, the student teachers talked much about the economic situation of the country. At the first stage, this category was coded as "economic concerns". At the second stage, the category was coded as "economic concerns relating to selection of teaching job". At the last stage, all categories were integrated into a general category which was coded as "teaching as a job finding centre."

Furthermore, as the study included multiple views of the student teachers, cross-case or cross-site analysis was used to construct a general abstraction across the views that would fit each of the individual views (Yin, 1994). Cross-cases analysis aimed to enhance generalisability among others (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In presenting their views and perceptions, in short voices, "theoretical sensitivity" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which is the ability to recognise what is important in data and to give the data meaning, was relied upon. The involvement of 23 student teachers, and taking all of their views, were very helpful for the researcher in the first place, since it allowed him to interpret the data and make connections between various issues that resided in the data as a whole.

In order to achieve validity and reliability for the study, the practice of "member checking" was used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). For this, after the analysis, the data were released to the student teachers, and they were asked whether the researcher's understanding and interpretation were acceptable. In presenting the findings, only the student teachers' first names are used in extracts. Although the participants only number 23, the

generalisation of the findings would still be achieved not in the quantitative research tradition, but in the qualitative research tradition (Ekiz, 2001; 2003), utilising the term "fuzzy generalisation". This means that "something has happened in one place and that it may also happen elsewhere (Bassey, 1999, p. 52). Some researchers argue that generalisation can also be possible in a conventional manner by means of the inclusion of multiple cases (Merriam, 1998). Thus, though the results only reflect the participants' pedagogical voices in the present study, yet there is the possibility that student teachers who are not participants in this study would have similar pedagogical voices in similar situations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings are presented here under five categories; teaching as a job finding centre, gaps between what they expected and what they faced, dissatisfaction with the course, images of teaching and teachers, and views of how to be teachers. The voices are termed "pedagogical" in the sense that the student teachers have experiences and views of how teaching and learning are and how it should be.

Teaching as a Job Finding Centre

Since the early 1990s, several economic crises have taken place in Turkey. These crises have had an impact upon students' choice of university courses in the sense that they mainly choose teaching because of the shortage of teachers, particularly in the area of primary education (Ekiz, 2006). A teacher is a civil servant, and it is relatively easy for a graduate to find a job after completing the course compared with other sorts of courses (e.g. engineering, agriculture, social studies) All of the student teachers remarked:

> I chose this department; I mean to be a teacher, in relation to the economic situation of Turkey. I see teaching as a guaranteed job. In fact, I wanted to be a psychologist, but, after graduating from a psychology department, it is very difficult to find a job. I have to earn my life. (Funda)

> I have two reasons for choosing a teaching job. The first is the economic reason. I mean, it is guaranteed job. It is very difficult to find a job in a country like Turkey. The second is that my primary school teacher impressed me very much. I will never forget him. He was very good teacher. I want to be like him. (Kenan)

Their previous experience of teaching and learning, i.e. schooling, whether effective or not, was one reason for participating in the teaching profession (Francis, 1995; Kagan, 1992; Sugrue, 1996; Tillema & Knol,

1997). Essentially, their social environment affected them in choosing teaching as a profession for economic reasons:

> I didn't want to be a teacher. Those who were around me always told me that I should be a teacher. They matched it with my personality. The most important reason for me choosing teaching as a job is that I have to earn my life. It is a guaranteed job. I wanted to be an economist, but they are lots of graduates who are looking for a job. I never thought to be a teacher ... My family has lots of economic difficulties. This affected me. I also experienced these difficulties with them. Now, I want to finish this department and want to help my family. That's why I chose teaching as a job. (Selda)

The current economic crisis of the country was the main reason why the students wanted to be teachers. Although teaching as a profession is very demanding job and requires, among others, "love and commitment" (Day, 1999), the primary needs of student teachers such as "finding a job" had a greater impact upon their choice of becoming involved in the teaching profession.

Gaps between What They Expected and What They Faced

In their voices, "gaps" were seen between what they expected and what they faced when they entered the teacher education course. The gaps revolved around the issues of teaching and learning they were provided with, and some of the teacher educators' negative attitudes towards them. They voiced the frustration experienced by lecturers. Some of their typical voices are:

> We are now candidates to be primary school teachers. Although teacher educators give some morale to us, some of them frightened us. They say that "you cannot do the teaching job. It is very difficult". We need some morale. Maybe, we've come here with no desire. But, at the end of the day, we're going to be teachers. Every job has its advantages and disadvantages. But it is necessary not to break our morale by telling us only the disadvantages. (Ömer)

> The education here is the last one before we'll be teachers. We have to have a very good education. Because, with the things we gain from here, we are going to educate children. Lecturers could not see this side. Our lecturers, at least a majority of them, come to the board and give the lectures and go away. When we don't understand the topics, we ask;" Could you repeat, for example, the last part, please!" They respond; "We don't expect something like this". If we don't understand, how are we supposed to teach children when we become teachers (Enver).

It was clear in their voices that different lecturers used different teaching strategies in the department, and sometimes they were seen as "in a rush" to complete the topics. This appeared to result in, among teacher educators, unshared understanding of how student teachers should be educated. However, it was very clear that the dominant teaching strategy was the traditional lecture method, the transmission of the knowledge from one to another. It seemed there was no shared understanding of how to run the lectures among teacher educators.

The "gap" was also related to the inadequacy of the library facilities:

> The library opportunities are very limited. When a lecturer gives us an assignment, we cannot find the related books. The available books are very old. (Emre)

> Library opportunities are very limited, so we try to memorise the topics from a book we have. Our aim is only to pass the exams, not to learn. (İsmail Hakkı)

What was obvious in their voices was that by the current practice and facilities available in the department, their prime aims seemed to be not to be prepared for teaching profession by being aware of available literature on pedagogy, and so getting involved in active construction and re-construction of their learning experiences, but rather to fulfil bureaucratic responsibilities and memorising related lectures and reading materials, with a pragmatic aim; "passing the exams".

Dissatisfaction with the Course

The student teachers' initial pedagogical voices demonstrated that they were dissatisfied with the course they were offered. There was a traditional practice in place which defined courses in terms of what teacher educators were required to cover, not what the student teachers expected to learn. At the same time, the student teachers pointed to the necessity of an interpersonal relationship between their educators and themselves. They said that teacher educators lacked necessary interpersonal relationships, which they believed was crucial for them to become effective teachers. One typical extract is as follows:

> To be a lecturer is to have a very good interaction with the students. It is not important only to give a topic. There was a good interaction when we were in high school. I, like my friends, studied a lot on the subjects given by the teachers, who had very good interaction with us. We aren't going to listen to those otherwise ... Lectures here are very boring. (Dilek)

In their pedagogical voices was also heard the frustration experienced by having too much subject knowledge. They insistently talked about knowledge of their subject, and thus felt that they had unnecessary grasp of the subject to be taught in primary schools:

> We're not going to apply a lot of things in primary schools that we learn here ... Maybe some of our lecturers' think; "these students will not use what they gain from here in primary schools". For this reason, they don't give importance to the lectures. They only give the lectures and go away. (Mustafa)

What they expected from lectures was to have an active role in their own learning, which seemed to be related to their initial experience of teaching and learning before coming to the teacher-training department. The following extract from a student teacher illustrates a common expectation:

> We are not allowed to speak during the lessons. We should be active in our own learning. But lecturers don't provide us with this opportunity. They only give presentations ... (Hale)

They voiced the concern that the teacher educators had a lack of personal relationship with them, which appeared to result in low morale among students. Frustration was experienced due to some of the teacher educators' attitudes towards them. Their voices clearly showed their dissatisfaction was mainly concerned with being forced to grasp too much subject knowledge that was not a requirement of the National Curriculum for primary education. The other reason was that the lecture-centred methods were so dominant that they turned into passive learners. Student teachers were seen as passive recipients of knowledge, and this knowledge played almost no part in their own learning. They pointed out the necessity of an active knowledge construction in their own learning.

Images of Teaching and Teachers

The student teachers' images of teaching and learning were directly related with the issue of how they saw the teaching profession as a whole. Their images of teaching mainly revolved around feelings of love, patience, and the practice of classroom management. For them, to be effective teachers dominantly required loving children and teaching, and showing patience to the children. Some remarked that even though teaching was heavily based on feeling of patience, they believed that they lacked it:

> To me, the first requirement of the job is to love children. Because,we cannot give anything to them unless we love them. But, I don't have patience with children. (Funda)

Others stressed the importance of classroom management for teaching:

> An effective teacher has to be in control of the class. When she
> enters the classroom, all children should listen to her ... It is not
> necessary to transmit the knowledge in relation to the books. She
> has to say something outside the books. (Seval)

Still others pointed to knowing the pupils they would teach as the priority of teaching:

> Effective teachers in the first place should know their pupils, and
> then running the lessons follows. (Adem)

They had images of teaching and learning which seemed to have emerged and been shaped by their previous personal diverse experiences of education, even though these seemed to be unsystematic sets of thoughts and incoherent ideas. These personal images appeared to exert a powerful influence on what they wanted to learn and how they approached what they were offered by the primary teacher education department. Their images focused on the feeling of love and patience embedded in teaching, and the practice of classroom management.

Views on How to Be Teachers

This issue was linked to the student teachers' views on selection for the university course to become effective teachers. They believed that acceptance on a university course to be a student teacher regulated by the current policy was inadequate. Teaching was perceived as requiring an ability which other sorts of professions did not have:

> I don't agree with the idea that teaching is a job finding centre.
> Teaching requires ability. If someone has an ability in carpentry,
> he has to be guided accordingly. (Can)

> I agree with what my friend says. Everybody has to choose a job in
> relation to her/his abilities. But the economic situations of the
> country don't allow us to do so. (Rana)

Due to the complexities of teaching, it was very clear that teaching as a profession was perceived as requiring a sort of ability that a student teacher should have. For them, this ability could not be determined by a general university examination, but rather could be explored by a process that starts after primary education through good guidance.

The student teachers were confronted with a series of gaps in their initial experience of teacher education. These gaps were connected with the difference between what they hoped for and what they were faced with. The gaps mainly concerned; inadequate learning opportunities offered to them, limited library facilities, too much subject knowledge, and lecturers' negative attitudes and behaviour towards them.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study demonstrates that the majority of the students who chose primary school teaching as a profession did so not because of their interest, love, and commitment to it, but because of economic reasons. They pointed out that although they did not want to take part in this profession, the economic situation of the country, and finding a job after graduation, was the incentive behind their choice.

Student teachers have powerful pedagogical voices regarding teaching and learning before they come to the teacher education departments. Once they come, their voices are being shaped and re-shaped. Their voices should be taken into account if the teacher education departments are going to offer them effective education. For this to take place, it is necessary to have a shared aim and understanding of how to educate candidate teachers among teacher educators, and put these into practice. A collaborative work culture is necessary for success. If the teacher education departments are to be improved, it is essential to listen to the voices of the student teachers so that the department can be improved.

The focus of this study was on the pedagogical voices of the student teachers about their initial experience of a pre-service teacher education course. For the student teachers, there were gaps between what they expected and what they faced as teachers. As one student teacher put it politely: "There is no difference between the education here and at high school." There is a clear consensus among teacher educators that student teachers should be active in their own learning and thus construction of their own knowledge. However, as can be seen in the student teachers' pedagogical voices, the didactic form of teaching is a very common practice, which leads to memorisation of theories of context-free teaching and learning. They also pointed out that some of the lecturers lacked interpersonal relationship, which they believed was a very important skill to be effective teachers. An organisation should have a shared understanding and practice for its costumers. For this to take place, staff should have the "ideal speech condition" (Dixon, 1993, cited in Fenwick, 2001) as the best way for the organisation of learning and development. What is important in the ideal speech condition is that staff should work for the same aim and practice in the same way. In this ideal speech condition, there should

be a space where lecturers can talk about how to make student teachers active in their own learning.

It is recommended that the student teachers' voices to be heard at the department of teacher education. As educators, we need to offer all student teachers the opportunity to express their pedagogical voices about their experiences in order to become part of the demanding teaching profession so that the department can be improved. It can be claimed that they will only be able to fulfil their educational purpose (meaningful transmission of knowledge, skills, and values) if they are well be prepared for the profession.

Pre-service teacher education program providers should become consciously aware of how important students' pedagogical voices are to improve the department in terms of providing them with meaningful learning experiences. Once educators are explicitly aware of their voices and of taking these voices into account, then it may well be easy to provide valuable feedback to arrange a better program of study for them. At the end of the day, they will be teachers who will educate future generations.

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