

Beyond Practicum: Interplay between Prospective EFL Teachers' Conceptualizations of Field Experience and Teaching Career

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ABSTRACT

Becoming a teacher of English language requires both knowledge of theory and practice. Teacher candidates at the faculties of education in BA programs in Turkey practice teaching through observing real classrooms and doing micro-teachings in real schools during their four-year teacher training. This study was conducted at a foundation university in Turkey, in which senior pre-service teachers, before they enter the teaching profession and become novice teachers, go and experience teaching to fulfill the requirements of the practicum (school experience course) in their last semester. This course requires them to observe three different levels of classroom in real schools, write reflective papers, prepare lesson plans and practice teaching. The transition from pre-service to novice teacher can be facilitated via successful practicum programs offered by the faculties of education in Turkey. The impact of practicum tends to result in either entry into teaching or teacher retention. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the effects of this program on students' decisions on entry into the profession. The data were collected in two stages: Before and after the practicum. At the beginning of the last semester, before they go practicum, five pre-service EFL teachers were asked the reasons for choosing teacher education programs, and their concerns related to practicum and the profession through an in-depth semi-controlled interview. Those pre-service teachers were also interviewed on the same topics at the end of the semester, after practicum. Results indicated that practicum or school experience has contributed positively to their perceptions regarding their entry into teaching because almost all of them wanted to enter teaching at the end of the program, and they are in-service teachers now. These findings suggest that teacher education courses should aim to develop students' practical knowledge, and the relationship among the mentor teacher, the supervisor, and the student teacher should be valued and supported more in teacher education programs.

INTRODUCTION

All teacher candidates at the faculties of education in BA programs in Turkey practice teaching through observing real classrooms and doing micro-teachings in real schools during their four-year teacher training. In pre-service teacher education, in addition to theoretical courses, student teachers are also required to engage in practical courses, in which they experience teaching. Hence, teaching practicum is considered as an essential component of teacher education for the preparation of novice teachers to real teaching (McIntyre, Byrd, & Fox, 1996). It influences both their teaching philosophy and perceptions regarding an effective teacher education program. Moreover, pre-service teachers, cooperating or mentor teachers, and faculty of education all realize its key role. Therefore, practice teaching has been a required core course in language teacher education (LTE) programs.

For English language trainee teachers who are placed at schools for their teaching practicum, however, this can be a painful experience. They might face challenges pertaining

to the new environment, school organization, curriculum and methodology, teaching techniques, materials, and student population. As mentioned in Lazaraton & Ishihara (2005), student teachers of English might have concerns regarding their level of English proficiency, self-esteem, cultural knowledge, and contextual knowledge (Polio & Wilson-Duffy, 1998) while they are dealing with their practicum. Roberts (1998) also indicated that student teachers have some concerns since they have survival needs. They focus on how they are covering the activities they prepared, if they deal with the time well, and how they can manage the class rather than how their students' learn.

As is emphasized in Mukminin, Kamil & Haryanto (2017, p. 309), "... understanding candidates' initial motives to pursue teaching credentials in a teacher education program is indispensable as a foundation to develop teacher education policies before, during, and after entering the program." This means that the quality of the practicum process, which affects student teachers to a great extent, is the basis of im-

proving teacher education programs. Most student teachers start their teacher education with different motivations to become teachers. Nonetheless, a minority of students primarily regard teacher education as a way to earn a degree that offers a wide variety of job opportunities, including those outside teaching (Rots et al., 2006). Therefore, one of the aims of the present study is to explore the reasons to choose teaching as a profession in order to understand the relationship between students' initial motivations to study teacher education and their decisions on entry into the profession after graduation. Thus, the relationship between practicum and pre-service teachers (not) entering into teaching profession is elicited.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivations for Choosing to Teach

Student teachers have different motives for their decisions to become a teacher. These factors have been summarized by Papanastasiou & Papanastasiou (1997, p. 306) as "intrinsic, extrinsic, and alternative factors". According to the researchers, the intrinsic factor refers to "the act of teaching itself, and with the values that students hold for themselves." This involves "the love of children, the inborn talent for teaching, and the excitement and interest in the teaching/learning process". Parkay & Hardcastle (1991) also pointed out that teachers learn a great amount of information in the process of teaching, so the discovery of new subjects attracts many new candidates into the profession. The extrinsic factor is related to the gains of being a teacher, and the factors affecting students to choose teaching as their main field of study. This consists of "sub-factors like relatively short working hours, vacations, immediate or definite employment, and salary, which are experienced by all members of the profession in the same country, and the sub-factor status of the profession." The alternative factor, on the other hand, is associated with "interpersonal influences which refer to the cases where students choose to become teachers because of the wish of relatives" and "academic ability".

Similarly, Mukminin et al. (2017) examined Indonesian 'EFL female student teachers' desire to enter a teacher education program' in a qualitative study. Semi-structured in-depth interviews indicated that these student teachers had "a strong mixing of altruistic motives (idealistic and social mission such as helping society become better in future, helping rural and remote areas, shaping future educated generation, and loving to work with young generation), intrinsic motives (intellectual mission, role models' continuation, and personal fulfillment), and extrinsic motives (compatible work schedules and a hero status at school and in society)" (p. 321).

In another study, Snyder et al., (1995) investigated pre-service teachers' reasons for choosing teaching as a profession and found that this is because of "a natural inclination and ability to teach that is recognized by others". It was concluded in the study that "the quest for personal fulfillment; the desire to work with young people to make a difference in their lives; and the opportunity to continue a meaningful engagement with the subject of their choice" are the basic motives for becoming a teacher. Therefore, it

was aimed to pursue the same aim in the present study and explore the motivations for becoming a teacher in Turkey.

Practicum

Becoming a teacher of English language requires both knowledge of theory and practice. Teacher candidates at the faculties of education in BA programs in Turkey practice teaching through observing real classrooms and doing micro-teachings in real schools during their four-year teacher training. Senior pre-service teachers, before they enter the teaching profession and become novice teachers, go and experience teaching to fulfill the requirements of the practicum (school experience course) in their last semester. This course requires them to observe three different levels of classroom in real schools, write reflective papers, prepare lesson plans and practice teaching. Then they are evaluated and given a grade by their supervisors and cooperative teachers on the basis of their performance.

The practicum, supervised practical experience of on-the-job training, is considered as a strong and important component in the education of teachers. This practical experience, also referred to as teaching practice, practicum, student teaching, or school experience, is a critical aspect of pre-service teacher education (Zeichner, 2002) and is a required core course in most language teacher education programs. The reason is that most teacher educators appreciate the significance of providing student teachers with a real classroom teaching experience, through which learner teachers are provided with opportunities to utilize their accumulated knowledge for instructional decisions (Gebhard et al., 1990) and opportunities to change their teaching behavior (Gebhard, 1990). In the initial stages of the practicum, teacher candidates observe the classroom and the cooperating teacher, whereas in the practice stage, which is the second phase of practicum, student teachers utilize their acquired knowledge in a real classroom setting.

Besides, Roberts (1998) noted the 'triadic' relationship among the student teacher, the cooperating teacher and the supervisor. Communication between the university and the cooperating school is really important for the development of the student teacher. There might be such cases in which this relationship may be spoiled if the curriculum is fractured (Turney, 1982a). Therefore, if supervisors and trainee teachers have shared ideas regarding teaching and learning, the practicum process can be better.

Research purports that the practicum had a positive impact on the students' attitudes towards teaching (Hodge et al., 2002), increased the level of their job satisfaction (Reynolds et al., 2002), and decreased their stress significantly (Meirink, et al., 2009). Some other research highlighted the importance of practicum by stating that factors associated with teacher turnover and retention are related to initial teaching commitment and the quality of early teaching experiences (Ruhland, 2001). Students might start teacher education with a more or less explicit motivation to become teachers and the practicum might affect student teachers' decisions for entry into profession; they might choose to become a teacher, to stay in teaching or to give it up for another career at the

end of practice teaching. Despite teaching experiences that are positively related to newly graduate teachers' teaching commitment; some pre-service teachers decide to seek jobs outside teaching after the practicum. The crucial role of the practicum may result in entry into teaching profession and commitment to teaching of graduating teachers or teacher retention.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the impact of practicum on job entrance and student teachers' willingness to become a teacher before and after practicum. It was intended to explore the process of practicum. In doing so, the study attempted to examine how praxis could be improved to affect teacher candidates' decisions positively for entry to teaching profession. The research question that is addressed in this exploratory study is:

To what extent does practicum have an impact on EFL teacher candidates' decisions about entry into the teaching profession?

METHOD

Context and Participants

It is obligatory for a pre-service teacher to do practice teaching before entering into the teaching profession to be counted as qualified in Turkey. Faculties of Education are responsible for supplying student teachers a teacher education program in which theory and practice can be combined. In this vein, they offer pre-service teachers opportunities to practice what they have learnt during their teacher education.

In Turkey, the participant student teachers, in their final year of teacher education, are required to do systematic observations at three different levels of classrooms in the first term, and they also complete 6 hours of teaching (3 official and 3 unofficial teaching presentations) combined with observation tasks in the second term. These teaching presentations are under the control of both cooperating teachers (mentors at schools) and supervisors (instructors at university). They also write reflective papers and prepare lesson plans, which are assessed by their supervisors and the cooperating teachers.

Five female EFL student teachers agreed to participate in the study. The student teachers are undergraduate pre-service teacher education students in the final year of a four-year degree. They are enrolled at a foundation university in Turkey and were placed in private schools located in Istanbul for their practice teaching. For the present study, data were collected both at the beginning and end of the second term in participants' fourth year when they are doing their practicum.

Data Collection and Analysis

The aim of the research was to explore student teachers' teaching perspectives before and after practicum. Therefore, the present study is purely qualitative since qualitative research provides an interpretation of the social world of participants by focusing on their "experiences, perspectives, and histories" (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p.3). Therefore, the participant student teachers were asked questions to elicit

answers related to their background and reasons for choosing language teaching as a profession.

In-depth semi-controlled interviews

For the purpose of the study, two face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted. In the first interview conducted before practicum, since one of the goals of the present paper was to examine the impact of practicum on student teachers' decision on entry into teaching profession, student teachers were asked to respond some questions with respect to their perceptions on entry into teaching profession and student teaching. In the second interview, which was conducted after practicum, the aim was to see the impact of practicum clearly and to understand whether they are really persistent to become a teacher prior to having a real classroom experience. Therefore, the participants were asked several questions regarding their desire to choose the profession and their concerns regarding their future profession. They were asked two different sets of questions in the interviews and those questions can be considered as a part of a continuum and complementary.

The interviews lasted approximately 10 minutes for each student teacher and were audiotaped with their permission. In order to analyze the data elicited from the interviews, they were transcribed, and content analysis was carried out by the two researchers in order to consider inter-coder reliability (7). Therefore, themes were extracted from the transcripts, and some assertions were pointed out through open-coding. The analysis of the interviews can be grouped under several categories which are discussed in the results section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to find an answer to the question of possible impacts of practicum on student teachers' decisions on entry into the teaching profession, the interviews conducted before and after practicum had two objectives: 1) to elicit motivations or reasons for choosing teaching as a profession and their concerns to become a teacher (the first interview), and 2) to elicit their perspectives regarding entry into teaching and their practicum (the second interview).

In order to explore the first objective, five student teachers were asked questions about their beliefs on becoming a teacher. Upon the content analysis, some assertions were come up with below.

Assertions in the Pre-practicum Interviews

ASSERTION 1: Factors that Influence to Become an EFL Teacher

The teacher candidates (4 out of 5) reported their willingness to become an EFL teacher. Pre-service teachers' participating in the study determined seven factors that influenced them to pursue their career as a teacher, which can be grouped as external and internal factors. External factors for becoming a teacher appearing via content analysis can be defined as reasonable and flexible working hours, family impact and long vacations. When participants were asked the reasons behind their decisions to pursue teaching as a

career, all teacher candidates shared the view that teachers have fixed and flexible working hours.

One of the candidates said:

"Teachers are at home after five o'clock and at weekends. When you finish your work, you can leave. You do not have to work at weekends and after 5 o'clock. You have time to refresh and recharge."

Few also reported that teachers get their salary in summer despite not working. Some pre-service teachers considered the long vacations and it being an easy-going profession as decisive factors. Some informants indicated family encouragement as one of the factors that prompted them to undertake teaching as a profession. For example, one of the student-teachers said in her interview:

"My parents encouraged me to become a teacher, they often emphasized that it is a very appropriate profession for females."

Another participant expressed similar ideas:

"My parents supported me to choose teaching as a profession expressing that I would feel comfortable in the future when I had my own family and kids."

The early impact of family members who are themselves are teachers was also influential in some respondents' decisions. This variable is consistent with Manuel & Hughes' (2006) findings. It can be exemplified in one of the respondents' interview:

"My uncle and grandfather were teachers so I had a desire to be like them."

The participants also placed an emphasis on internal motives such as the love of English, their English teachers and children as well as enjoyment of teaching. The factor which was highly influential for the students to enter the major was the love of English. Most interviewees acknowledged that they liked English and they were successful in English at school, and this was a factor in entering the profession. Some respondents also mentioned good experiences in their own education were a decisive motive for choose teaching. Still some others emphasized the good relationship with their teachers or recalled an inspirational teacher at high school they took as a role model who led them to become a teacher.

It was also mentioned by several teacher candidates that the strong love of children is one of the influential reasons affecting the teacher candidates' decision to become a teacher. When participants asked the reasons why they particularly preferred ELT department among other education programs, they stated:

"I had to choose a department related to language and there were not many opportunities."

"It required a higher score (than literature etc.) and I knew that I did not have to get pedagogical formation. I knew I would secure when I had teaching diploma."

The difficulties experienced in courses such as math and physics was also mentioned as one of the factors to choose foreign language teaching department.

ASSERTION 2: Concerns Related to Employment and Teaching Profession Elicited before Practicum

When asked about their employment choices shortly before practicum period, a plethora of concerns and issues related

to employment and teaching profession were laid out by the respondents.

Data analysis of student teachers' perception of 'employment opportunities' reveals that KPSS (Public Personnel Selection Examination) is the most discouraging factor for the entry into profession. Concerns pertaining to KPSS indicate that undergraduate students feel inadequate about KPSS and believe that it is really difficult to pass the examination and to be assigned as a teacher. A number of them also stated that getting a teaching position is not guaranteed even if people pass the exam. Nonetheless, despite KPSS, content analysis of the interviews prior to practicum demonstrates that respondents prefer to work at state schools upon graduation. The reasons for this have been identified through data analysis as lack of job security at private schools, inadequacy of job opportunities, excessive workload and long working hours in addition to low salary offered at the start-up. One of the trainee teachers said:

"The idea of having long vacation for three months in summer and two-weeks of in winter is appealing but this is not the case in private schools. Teachers working at private sector complain about having to attend conferences very often and to prepare lesson plans. You might have to teach up to 30 hours a week, and will most probably be underpaid as a new teacher. There is no job security in private schools, either. It is said that working at state schools is less tiring and summer holidays are longer."

Another prospective teacher acknowledged that:

"State schools offer more agreeable working conditions. Most teachers working at private schools say that they it is weary to work at private schools. Besides, working at state schools promises regular income."

Two of the teachers also expressed that working hours are more flexible at state schools.

"There are no replies to my job applications and that is scary. I sometimes feel doubtful and hopeless. If I decide to enter into teaching I do not feel that I can find what I expect. Weekend at weekends and in summers scare me. It is said that teachers at private schools work at school apart from their lessons."

Only one candidate mentioned that she was not contemplating working at state schools owing to KPSS.

In addition to stating specific problems attributed specifically to private or state schools, informants also stated problems underpinning teaching profession in general. All the participants indicated that they had concerns regarding classroom management and their language efficacy. One of the student teachers said, *"I feel that I won't be able to maintain discipline in the classroom. People say that private school students are spoiled. It may be difficult."*, and *"I am concerned about my language proficiency level especially with high school students."*

Besides, they mostly highlighted that teaching is an underpaid profession and has low social prestige in society. This is exemplified by one of the candidates below:

"Teaching is an underpaid job although you work long hours. Your working hours are not limited to school time. The government and private schools ignore the fact that

teachers must spend time planning their lessons, grading homework and attending after-school activities in addition to parent-teacher meetings.”

The issue of being able to support a family on such a low salary was also a concern highlighted by a number of teacher candidates.

“Teachers are not valued or respected by the government, society, or students. Besides, I do not believe that I will earn enough money to maintain my life. It is impossible to support or take care of a family on the salary of a teacher. If I become an academician I might earn a bit more.”

As noted, the second objective of the interviews was to determine if practicum affected their decision on entry into teaching and to provoke students’ views in terms of their teaching practice. Therefore, the interview questions asked after practicum focused on their perspectives regarding practicum and their suggestions for teacher education, as well. Assertions after student teaching below are found upon the content analysis.

Assertions in the Post-practicum Interviews

ASSERTION 1: Entry into the Profession

The analysis demonstrates that practicum contributed pre-service teachers’ career decisions. Most pre-service teachers are willing to take a teaching position upon graduation. One who was not conceiving to become a teacher changed her idea at the end of the practicum. She said, *“I wasn’t planning to become a teacher, but now I do”*.

Based on the pre-service teachers’ comments (4 out of 5), the practicum helped them make their decisions about the age-group of students they wanted to teach. One of them said, *“I feel that teaching at a primary or high school will affect my professional growth negatively. I would like to teach university student”* and *“I assume that working at a high school will be more tiring. I want to work at a primary school”*.

Three of them added that, contrary to what they had expected, they had a better relationship with young learners than they had with high school students. According to the interview data presented, the practicum experience proved to exert impact on the type of school that wanted to work, too. Some stated that they decided to work with either primary school students or high school students. The student teachers also decided to work whether at a private school or a state school upon graduation. The following excerpts support this finding:

“I feel that teaching at a primary or high school will impact my professional growth negatively. I would like to teach university students.”

Similarly, another student teacher expressed that:

“I assume that working at high school will be less tiring. I want to work at a primary school”.

Obviously, praxis had an impact on their decisions because most novice teachers acknowledged that they considered working at private schools for several reasons. Interestingly, most teachers had stated in the first interviews that they were considering at state schools before the practicum.

“I am considering working at a private school. During practicum, I realized that I cannot apply what I want at a state school. Students at private schools have a higher level of English language proficiency. Private schools, where there are foreign students, provide wider opportunities in terms of interaction. There are certain things that I cannot implement at state schools”.

Therefore, the underlying reason might be related to the facilities at private schools with respect to educational technology and student profile. Nonetheless, one respondent expressed her concerns about entry to teaching profession by stating that:

“I do not consider teaching due to the challenges presented by KPSS”

The content analysis indicated that the impact of practicum on student teachers was positive. The further analysis of the interviews identified the following factors as contributing issues to this positive influence.

ASSERTION 2: Professional Development through Practicum

Two of the pre-service teachers’ participating in the study expressed that they have learned a lot by observing cooperating teacher in class. Two teacher candidates expressed that the colleagues they observed were implementing a variety of teaching methods during the lesson. In addition, the importance given to integration of four skills and the utilization of authentic material were the notions stated by the participants.

In addition to what they learned through observation, some other reflections of practicum are as follows. The results of the analysis of interviews display that the participants perceive the practicum as a means for the preparation of teaching profession. All pre-service teachers professed practicum as a positive experience and believe that they improved themselves in the teaching practice. All seem to have learned from and learned through teaching practice. Most of them emphasized that they loved the profession after practice teaching and developed positive attitudes towards the profession.

“I used to have negative attitude towards teaching profession. Now I like teaching”.

Few of the participants, who involved in school-based teaching practicum, expressed that they learned what behavior is expected from them in the teacher’s room.

Another positive aspect of the practicum identified from the data was that it increased self-efficacy of student teachers. Four novice teachers indicated that they saw they could succeed. The feeling of fulfillment could be observed in one student teacher’s excerpt: *“I discovered that I could teach and I had a talent for teaching”*.

This finding substantiates the belief that pre-service practicum enhances self-efficacy. It also supports Shinde and Karekatti (2012)’s finding that student teachers have self-efficacy and confidence because they believe that they can teach effectively. Teacher efficacy has been associated with ‘enthusiasm for teaching, teaching commitment, and retention in teaching’. (e.g., Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007). Teacher efficacy at time of graduation is positively related to graduates’ teaching commitment and willingness to enter the teaching profession (Rots et al., 2007).

Another emerging theme pertaining to contributions of practicum is related to classroom setting. Some novice teachers indicated that they gained experience in classroom management and added that they learned about the act of teaching and what goes on in the classroom. Some said that they had expected to gain experience in using different teaching methods before the practicum and they actually did thanks to practice teaching.

Several respondents reported that they learned how to devise activities and to implement them. Classroom language and arranging the tone of voice were some of the things which were learnt gradually during practice teaching.

The theme analysis of data also revealed that the novice teachers reflected on their self-perceived competencies and accomplishments of their own teaching during practicum. Most of them were pleased with their performance. Most attributed this success partly to their supervisor. According to Roberts (1998), the 'triad' relationship among student teacher, the cooperating teacher and the supervisor is really important for the development of the student teacher. Therefore, it is no surprise that student teachers were influenced by their supervisors, but in a positive way in this context.

Clearly, novice teachers suppose that field experience plays a significant role in preparing them for teaching profession in real world. Some study participants expressed that they gained experience in classroom management in time. The thoughts of one student teacher are as follows:

"Practice teaching has been very beneficial. I have learned to control the class by time. My anxiety reduced gradually as time went by".

ASSERTION 3: Connection between Learning Theory and Classroom Practice

The results of the data analysis display that all student teachers feel their teacher education program has prepared them for the demands of teaching and identified connection between theory and practice as one of the positive aspects of their experience. All pre-service teachers in the study reported that they benefited from undergraduate courses in pedagogy which take place at the teacher education institution and had the chance to examine their own knowledge acquired at university in real life situation thanks to their practical orientation. The connection between theory and practice has been highlighted as one of the positive aspects of their practicum experience.

While some of the participants explained that TEFL grammar course was of a great benefit to integrate educational theory and knowledge with the practical realities of the classroom, some participants indicated that they benefited immensely from young learners course. The interviews revealed that these two undergraduate courses, TEFL grammar and Young Learners, were perceived to have direct relevance to their pedagogical experience in real classroom settings. Participants also added that they could prepare their own material according to the level they taught thanks to their undergraduate courses. Only few pre-service teachers said they could not completely make the connection between theory and practice although admitting that they benefited from teacher education courses. These outcomes support the oth-

er study results highlighting a positive correlation between student teachers' perspectives regarding their preparedness for teaching and their future decisions to enter into teaching (e.g., LaTurner, 2002; Zientek, 2007).

ASSERTION 4: Teaching Challenges or Concerns

Research participants indicated several concerns they experienced before teaching practicum.

Some research participants stated that they were anxious about their practice teaching period prior to the practicum. Some stated that they were stressed out because they would teach at a high school. It has been noted that some participants were anxious about their official and unofficial presentations owing to their inexperience.

Data responses coded to this topic regarding teaching challenges or concerns expressed by the pre-service teachers identified several specific problems or concerns linked to the performance of novice teachers during the teaching practice.

The prospective teachers in the present study had to struggle with a lot of challenges. It has been noted that procedural concerns of time management, classroom management, and arranging the level of English were perceived as most frustrating problems encountered by pre-service teachers. Classroom management in particular has been identified as the most recurrent theme by all participants. One participant explained that it was a real challenge with young learners adding that there was usually too much noise in the classroom during classes and she had to struggle with this.

"There was a general disorder in class at the beginning and I felt frustrated."

Most of the participants declared that they experienced time management problems. For example, one participant stated that she could not finish her presentation on time while another complained about not having sufficient amount of time for free activities.

"I was not aware that I was exceeding the time limit. I had to leave out some of the follow-up activities."

There were also problems related to arranging the level of English stated by pre-service teachers. Three pre-service teachers expressed they experienced problems related to language. One complained that she had difficulty in arranging the tone of her voice. While one stated that students level of English was much higher than she expected, another articulated that she was in trouble in simplifying her language according to young learners. One of the responses revealed that:

"The choice of correct vocabulary was a real challenge for me with young learners. I could not know what to say in class. I had this feeling of being always conscious about the choice of words and sentence structure."

Technological problems were experienced by only one novice teacher. One informant declared a cooperating teacher-based problem and one also expressed that she had difficulty in establishing communication with students in class.

ASSERTION 5: Supportive social context and undergraduate courses

Novice teachers participating in the study revealed five significant notions related to social context: faculty support

(supervisor or mentor teacher), cooperating teacher, peer teacher, school administration and learners. All pre-service teachers reported that cooperating teacher's attitude was positive and supportive. Here is an example of excerpt reported during the interview with informants:

"Supervisor was really supportive; he mostly gave me positive feedback. He did not dwell on my mistakes but on my good sides and this led me to better lessons"

Likewise, another respondent explained that:

"My supervisor was always encouraging helped me bring solutions to the problems I faced during the practicum. I was lucky enough to have a very good relationship and gain very good understanding."

One of them attributed the success of her practicum partly to her supervisor saying: *"I completed my practicum successfully since my supervisor was really helpful."*

These findings are not dissimilar from research indicating that faculty support is positively related to graduates' perception of teacher education preparation (Rots, Aelterman, Vlerick, & Vermeulen, 2007) and faculty support enhances graduating teachers' entrance into the teaching profession (Stokking et al., 2003).

Not all the novice teacher experiences with associating teachers constructive. Few novice teachers reported negative statements about her cooperating teacher stating that she was too intervening. It seems that the mentor teacher did not consider the novice teachers as professional colleagues. Research indicates that some supervising teachers discourage teacher candidates rather than empowering them to take their place within it. They position themselves as being powerful and the owner of teacher knowledge. (Santoro cited in Han, 2005)

"I had a problem with my associate teacher. She did not let me to put myself in real teacher position. She intervened a lot."

All others said that the cooperating teacher was supportive and helpful. The following quote has been obtained from the interview as evidence:

"I had problems controlling the children in the class. When there was too much noise in the classroom working with young learners, the class teacher (my cooperating teacher) helped me with the class management."

The respondents also stated their ideas about their colleagues. Most of the novice teachers in the study said that staff members were guiding, supportive and helpful, too. The collaboration between novice teachers and their colleagues could be observed in the interviews. The sentiments of most participants can be summarized in the following quotes:

"Staff members supported us and made positive comments. They gave us advice and helped to develop our teaching material and helped with resources."

"Peer teachers' attitudes towards us were great. They were really friendly. We still keep in touch"

These illustrative responses substantiate previous research by Zeichner and Grant (1981). It was emphasized in that study that the teaching practice in cooperating schools affects 'the socialization process of pre-service teachers' involving 'forming relationships, and learning how to interact with school authorities and colleagues' (construction of

personal network). Some pre-service teachers also mentioned the supportive and positive attitude of the school administration.

Furthermore, from the insightful responses of four of the respondents, it is clear that that they established good rapport with the students. Some of them added that they had a better relationship especially with young learners than they had with high school students.

In addition, the student teachers took our attention to the importance of undergraduate courses. Combination of undergraduate courses with practicum gave them an opportunity to make connections between learning theory and classroom practice, which they stated as one of the positive aspects of their experience. The results of the data analysis display that all student teachers feel their teacher education program has prepared them for the demands of teaching and identified a connection between theory and practice. STs had the chance to examine their own knowledge acquired at university in real life situations thanks to their practical orientation.

"Language teacher education is incomplete without theories of language learning. In my practicum days, I had the chance to see and observe the application of what I had learned in faculty."

The interviews revealed that these three undergraduate courses, 'TEFL grammar', 'Material Design, Adaptation, and Evaluation' and 'Young Learners', were perceived to have direct relevance to their pedagogical experience in a real classroom settings. Participants also added that they could prepare their own material according to the level they taught thanks to their undergraduate courses.

"I benefited a lot from all undergraduate courses but the one related to Material design, adaptation and evaluation helped me prepare appropriate materials for my students."

These outcomes support other study results highlighting a positive correlation between student teachers' perspectives regarding their preparedness for teaching and their future decisions to enter into teaching (e.g. LaTurner, 2002; Zientek, 2007).

Nevertheless, STs complained about their lack of abilities in using technology in class such as smart boards, online platforms of publishing companies, web 2.0 applications, and integrating I-pad into classroom.

"I was extremely nervous before my first unsupervised teaching because teachers in private schools were surprised to see that I did not know how to use smart board. I am not computer-illiterate but I felt that I was incompetent in using educational technology devices and applications in teaching. Today's kids are technology monsters. I prepared an activity using cardboards and pictures I cut from magazines; it was a bit disappointing experience."

Challenges associated with developing teachers' abilities at teacher education faculties to use technology in the classroom during praxis have been identified by Angeli & Valanides (2009).

Assertion 6: Pre-service teachers' suggestions for improving the current teaching practicum

Some suggestions have been made by novice teachers pertaining to improving current practice teaching. All

participants had suggestions related to the duration of the practicum. Correspondingly, an informant explained that:

"A longer teacher practicum is better for pre-service teachers. The number of presentations and observations need to be increased. I am not satisfied with the duration of teaching practice and the number of days we spent in a week at the base-school. It was too short. I was never able to see the teaching of a grammatical point from the beginning to the end. I missed either the presentation or the follow-up activities."

They mentioned that it might be twice, three times or 5 days a week. Some student teachers suggested that the practicum should be a full year. Some other suggestions were made regarding student-mentor relationship and undergraduate courses. The following excerpt from participants' interviews display the fact stated above.

"Student teachers should meet with the mentor more often. In teacher education programs the number of lessons bases on practice must be increased. The last year of a 4-year teacher education program should be assigned completely to practice teaching."

Lastly, the participants suggested that as the technology improves, children are becoming more interested in technology and the Internet, so using technology in the classroom during practicum should be encouraged and student teachers should be given more opportunities for using and preparing technology-based teaching materials and lesson-plans.

CONCLUSION

In this exploratory study, student teachers' perspectives regarding teaching and practice teaching were examined. The impact of the practicum on entry into teaching was explored through two interviews, which aimed to evaluate their willingness to start their career as a teacher as well as their concerns at the outset of practicum and whether there is a change in their viewpoints at the end of the teaching practice period. Student teachers' suggestions for teacher education were also discussed. Several factors such as faculty support, mentoring support, establishment of good rapport with students at the base-school, relationship between educational theory and classroom practice and practice-based undergraduate courses in teacher education program emerged to have contributed to a more positive attitude towards pursuing a teaching career.

The attitude of university students towards pursuing a career in teaching state schools changed for many of them after the practicum. The study indicates that there exists the impact of educational theory on classroom practice confirming the significance of theoretical courses and calls for the integration of more practical courses into teacher education curriculum in Zeichner's (2002) words in order to better connect student teaching to the rest of the teacher education curriculum. Further research might study this topic by using other data collection tools such as repertory grid, observations, and field notes, making students keep diaries or write reflection papers.

Upon this study, some important implications might be articulated in terms of pre-service teacher education. First

of all, student teachers' beliefs might be uncovered regarding teaching and learning since this can make them aware of what they know and believe. Making them think and articulate what they know help their teacher development. Using concept maps as in this study might be one of the ways to elicit their beliefs.

The interviews also made us gain insights with respect to pre-service teachers' motives for becoming a teacher and their reflections on practicum as an important part of teacher education. The implications for teacher education indicate that there exists the impact of educational theory on classroom practice. Student teachers do not ignore the importance of theoretical knowledge, but they want more practical courses during their education. Therefore, teacher education courses should aim to develop students' practical knowledge, and the full final year of education in faculties should be allocated for teaching practice in which the students would engage in observations, do teaching, and assist their mentor teachers all week so that they see how to present and practice a new teaching point and make students produce it. Last but not least, the relationship among the mentor teacher, the supervisor, and the student teacher should be taken into consideration and valued in a teacher education program.

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