

# An Evaluation of the Views of Mental Retardation Practicum Students on Teaching Practicum

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## **Abstract**

Undergraduate students who were pursuing towards a degree in mental retardation in the department of special education at Anadolu University were interviewed in the present study. Specifically, the interviews focused on students' practicum experiences. The sample included 26 seniors and data were analyzed descriptively. Students mentioned that they had a positive practicum experience and that they were happy to have the chance to work with a more heterogeneous group of students in two different schools. They also mentioned that they prepared several lesson plans during the practicum process. The participants indicated that they were satisfied with the practicum in both semesters. Half of the participants pointed out that they had sufficient feedback from their university advisors.

## **Key Words**

Teaching Practicum, Special Education, Qualitative Research, Descriptive Analysis

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In teacher training programs, a practicum experience is usually included in the senior year for those students who successfully complete the theoretical requirements of the degree. The rationale for such a practical component is to give teacher candidates an opportunity to shift from being a student to becoming a teacher who has the responsibility of teaching others (Conderman, Morin, & Stephens, 2005). Thus, teaching practicum courses provide a chance for applying the knowledge into practice in real environments. The teacher candidates gain many experiences such a real environment. Through these experiences, the teacher candidates; *(i)* establish a bond with the actual teaching environment, *(ii)* learn through try-and-learn, *(iii)* develop high satisfaction, *(iv)* gain personal and professional development, *(v)* get the opportunity of one-to-one teaching, and *(vi)* gain the chance to take part in the future teachers. In short, teaching experience provides the teacher candidates an opportunity to gain skills for shifting from being a student to becoming a teacher. For such reasons, the field-based experiences have always been the indispensable parts of teacher training programs (Henry, 1989).

If teacher candidates are well-trained in both the theoretical and practical courses during their four years of education, this will positively affect their success of teaching experiences during their “real” teaching years. The National Center for Education Statistics in the U.S. showed that 29% of the teachers who did not have teaching practicum courses during their education have quitted their jobs within 5 years (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future-NCTAF, 2003). Moving from this point, it can be said that teaching practicum is one of the important courses in the teacher training programs.

According to the review of the literature, there are a number of factors affecting the success of teaching practices. Some of these factors are the content of the program, knowledge and qualifications of the supervising teacher who is responsible for the practicum class, qualifications of the practicum lecturer from the faculty, and the characteristics of the practicum school (Conderman et al., 2005).

Teacher training programs should include several aspects and although programs are trying to include all of the aspects required to be good programs, many researchers indicate that some teacher training programs lack some of these important aspects. For example, Richardson-Coehler (1988) mentioned that teaching practicum length was not enough in the university he conducted the study. Also, Guyton and McInt-

yre (1990) and Goodland, Soder and Sirotnik (1990) pointed out that there is a gap between the theoretical and practical parts of the teacher training programs they examined.

Besides the teacher training programs, practicum supervisors are another important aspect of successful practicum implementations. According to Pellet, Straye and Pellet (1999) and Woods and Weasmer (2003), practicum supervisors are becoming more important than the program and practicum lecturers. Teacher candidates usually follow their supervisors as role models in terms of the way they dress, talk, and teach throughout their practicum experiences (Johnson, 1987; Sinclair, Munns, & Woodward, 2005). Although site supervisors are very important for practicum students; unfortunately, it is not always possible to say that practicum supervisors are the best ones (Renzaglia, Hutchins, & Lee, 1997). Only a limited number of practicum supervisors carry the characteristics of a good supervisor (Meade, 1991).

Another important aspect of successful practicum is the practicum lecturer. Practicum lecturers are the representatives of the teacher training programs and play the role of assessing personnel (Borko & Mayfield, 1995). Although they play such an important role in the life of a practicum student, most do not have enough practicum experiences in order to provide sufficient feedback to teacher candidates (Haberman, 1983; Wagner & Aldinger, 1984). It can also be said that practicum lecturers are responsible of too many students at a given time that they cannot be in touch with each and every student for enough time (Baumgart & Ferguson, 1991).

The characteristics of the practicum schools are also important for successful practicum. The characteristics of the practicum school consists of many elements such as physical conditions of classrooms, characteristics of the student body in the school, educational practices that the school teachers follow in their lectures, personal characteristics of the practicum teachers, and etc. (Renzaglia et al., 1997; Zeichner & Gore, 1990).

Last but certainly not the least important aspect that is worth of mentioning is the educational experiences and knowledge of the teacher candidates. It is important for the teacher candidates to accumulate as much theoretical information as possible during their first three years in the faculty (Sinclair et al., 2005) because the theoretical background of

their professional lives are being shaped during those three years (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Dunkin, Precians, & Nettle, 1994).

It is important for the teacher candidates to gain the practical aspects of teaching and get ready for teaching in real classrooms via the teaching practicum in the final years of their education. Some of the valuable elements that can be gained as a result of the practicum experience are learning to *(i)* be role models at the end of the practicum courses, *(ii)* understand and value students, *(iii)* love teaching, *(iv)* communicate positively with parents, *(v)* be professionals, and *(vi)* be in harmony with their environments (Sinclair et al., 2005).

In general, teacher candidates should have competencies such as comforting the students, supporting the students for doing their best, understanding the psychology of the students, making assessment and evaluations in different situations, being self-confident and using technology effectively during their courses in their classes. Moreover, it is expected that the teacher candidates be creative and use their creativity while applying their programs (Deng & Gopinathan, 2003).

According to the literature, practicum courses are one of the most important courses of the teacher training programs both in Turkey and around the world. This is no different in special education teacher training programs as well. Although the contents of the practicum courses among the ten special education teacher training programs are the same in Turkey, there are some differences in the application of the content from one university to the other. While this research study was conducted, the practicum schools were a university unit and two governmental special education schools in the city center during the school year of 2005-2006. In Anadolu University, the teaching practicum courses were used to be run with six lecturers from the faculty of education for 4 days a week from 8.30 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. Most classroom teachers were special education teachers where the practicum students were placed in. The teaching practicum program was revised by the practicum lecturers at the beginning of the school year and regularly discussed and reformed in the monthly meetings within the year.

### **Research Requirement**

Special Education Department in Anadolu University has first graduated special education teachers in 1987. It has been thought that the research

studies about the evaluation of the teaching practicum courses would provide the courses to be more functional and help the teacher candidates become more qualified through the modified practicum courses. Looking from this point of view, it can be said that there are no studies on the evaluation of the practicum courses in Anadolu University. Çolak, Acar, Kurt and Acar (2002) have conducted a study on the opinions and suggestions of special education teachers about the competencies of teacher candidates in their practicum courses in their classes. The researchers did not evaluate the practicum process in their study. Moving with the need of evaluating the practicum process in Anadolu University, the purpose of the present study was determined as collecting the opinions of teacher candidates about the practicum courses and developing some suggestions for more efficient applications in the future years. In Turkey, the programs of Education Faculties are being determined by the Council of Higher Education; therefore, all the programs are the same in Education Faculties all over the country. For this reason, it is hoped that the results of the present study can provide information for applying more qualified practicum courses in all special education departments across the country. Thus, the general purpose of the present study was to evaluate the opinions and suggestions of the teacher candidates in Special Education Teacher Training Program at Anadolu University. Regarding this general purpose, the following questions were addressed:

1. What were the opinions of teacher candidates about the practicum process?
2. What were the opinions of teacher candidates about the practicum lecturers?
3. What were the suggestions of practicum students regarding the practicum courses?

### **Method**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the seniors who were planning to receive a bachelor's degree in Special Education at Anadolu University. These students were enrolled in the Teacher Training Program for Children with Mental Retardation. Data were analyzed descriptively (Berg, 1998; Gay, 1996; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). Semi-structured interviews were selected in order to collect the data because in order to examine the opinions and suggestions of the practicum students, some sub-questions were asked to the participants.

## **Participants**

Twenty eight out of 58 seniors who were enrolled in a Teacher Training Program for Children with Mental Retardation course in Special Education Department at Anadolu University volunteered to take part in the study. Ten of the participants were females and sixteen were males.

Before the study started, teacher candidates had been informed about the purpose and process of the study. During this meeting, all the students were also informed about the data collection process. They were told that the data would be collected using a tape recorder. The interviews would be recorded and the data would be transcribed verbatim by the researchers. Besides, the data would only be listened and read by the researchers but nobody else. At the end of this meeting, volunteer seniors were named as the participants of the study and a written consent was signed by the participants and researchers.

## **Development of Data Collection Material**

The interview questions were prepared regarding the aims of the practicum courses in the program. The questions consisted of the problems of the practicum students during their practicum courses; how they were affected by these problems; their opinions and suggestions about the practicum courses. The questions were given to five professionals from the field in order to be checked in terms of context and correctness. Depending upon the opinions of the professionals, some of the interview questions were replaced and the final version of the questions was formed. In order to evaluate the interview questions, three pilot interviews were conducted by the two researchers. A total of 21 questions were asked under nine basic titles to the participants during the interviews.

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected from April 17th to June 12th 2006. The interviews were conducted on the dates and hours which the participants determined. Each interview lasted between 30-80 minutes. All the interviews were tape-recorded. After the interviews, all the participants were given a code name by the researchers.

## Data Analysis

Collected data were analyzed descriptively. During the descriptive analysis, the collected data are presented according to the questions used in the interviews (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). During the present study, as a requirement of descriptive analysis, each interview was transcribed. The transcriptions were checked by the researchers and a draft interview coding form was developed.

After developing the draft interview coding form, the researchers marked the appropriate item for each question of each participant independently. In order to examine the consistency of the researchers about marking the answers on the interview coding forms, markings were compared and some important changes in the categories were done. After these changes, the last version of the interview coding form was constituted.

In order to determine the inter-raters reliability, all the interviews were read and appropriate categories were marked for all the questions of all the participants by the researchers independently. The reliability was between 85% and 100% with an average of 92.5%.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to evaluate the opinions and suggestions of the teacher candidates in the Special Education Teacher Training Program at Anadolu University about the practicum courses during their fourth year in the faculty. The results of the study were discussed regarding the research questions.

### 1. What were the opinions of teacher candidates about the practicum process?

During the interviews, the participants mentioned that they prepared skill, concept, and social skill teaching programs and also behavior management program for each semester. They also mentioned that they prepared daily programs for the classes they did their practicum in each semester. This finding was found to be consistent with the findings of Conderman et al (2005). Conderman and friends (2005) suggested that teacher candidates should prepare daily programs, take performance levels of students, prepare IEPs, and also take part in the IEP meetings of the students in the practicum schools. Besides these responsibilities,

some participants told that they learned how to communicate with students and to work with them systematically. Similar results could be seen in the study of Woods and Weasmer (2003).

In the present study, the participants also mentioned that the courses they practiced most difficultly from theory to practice were concept teaching and behavior management. In a study, Kagan (1992) found that the teacher candidates were disappointed with the classes they entered because they imagined very different classes. With the disappointment they felt, the teacher candidates failed to manage the behaviors of the students in their classes. Hence, they also failed to focus on the teaching activities because of the behavior problems in the class. This finding is also consistent with the findings of the present study.

The opinions of the teacher candidates about the theoretical courses were that they preferred more practical aspects even in the theoretical courses. They mentioned that they preferred their lecturers to conduct their courses in a more practical fashion during their first three years in the faculty. According to the literature, the teacher candidates should be provided with different teaching approaches and more practical courses and also practicum opportunities in the teacher training programs (Deng & Gopinathan, 2003; Sinclair et al., 2005).

## **2. What were the opinions of teacher candidates about the practicum lecturer?**

Teacher candidates mentioned that in both semesters they were mostly provided with sufficient feedback from their practicum lecturers. They also added that although the feedback were usually positive and motivating, they preferred more appropriate language and smiling faces from their lecturers during providing the feedback. Besides, the participants suggested that the practicum courses should be given to the volunteer lecturers in the faculties. Similar findings were revealed in Haberman (1983) and Warger and Aldinger's (1984) studies.

## **3. What were the suggestions of practicum students regarding the practicum courses?**

Participants of the present study suggested that the practicum lecturers should be responsible for fewer number of practicum students so that



they could conduct more numbers of observations and make comments on these observations. They also suggested that the practicum lecturers be role models at the beginning of the semesters for appropriate practices in the classes with the students with exceptionalities. They also suggested that the lecturers provide more positive feedback and be friendlier while providing feedback. In the study of Woods and Weasmer (2003), results revealed that the number of practicum students for each practicum lecturer was too many for the lecturers to make sufficient observations and give enough feedback. This finding seems to be consistent with the present study's results. Conderman and friends (2005) conducted a study showing that if the schools had four semesters, (80 %) of the participants addressed that they managed to make four observations in each semester, 20% mentioned that they made three observations in each term. If the schools had two semesters, 33% of the participants pointed that they managed to make four observations, 28% six observations and 13% eight observations in each semester. On the other hand, Sinclair and colleagues (2005) conducted a study showing that if the practicum lecturers had no practices in the real classes or if they had very limited practices, they could not give appropriate feedback for the actual classroom environments. These findings are also consistent with the present study's results.

In conclusion, teacher candidates mentioned many problems and suggestions related with the practicum process in their last year in the teacher training programs. Based on the feedback received from the students, it can be concluded that practicum courses should be extended in terms of the length of time; they should follow the theoretical courses in the first three years in a more practical fashion. Although the suggestions of the participants were so, the real situation in Turkey does not provide opportunity for more practical courses in the actual school environments. Therefore, the lecturers of the theoretical courses can be suggested to follow their courses by using more visual materials and show example practices with the technical devices in the classes. Moreover, it can also be recommended that practicum courses should be assigned to volunteer lecturers who have sufficient practice in actual classes. For the future studies, it can be recommended that researchers conduct interviews and study the opinions of classroom teachers, school administrators, and practicum lecturers on the practicum process.

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