

The Problems of Geography Education and Some Suggestions

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Abstract

When teacher education programs in Turkey are scrutinized in detail, it can be seen that geography education is included in the teacher training programs of Geography, Primary School, and Social Studies. These programs aim to provide field knowledge, general culture, and field teaching skills. The success of geography teaching depends on defining the problems and suggesting solutions for these problems. In this study, 16 volunteer instructors from eleven different universities were taken as participants and semi-structured interviews were carried out with the group. The data obtained were analyzed by descriptive analysis techniques. Some problems on geography education were identified and possible solutions to those problems were suggested. The main problems are that instructors are not sufficient in geography education; that the removal of some geography courses negatively affects geography education; and that teacher trainees in the field have low motivation. It is hoped that the study will shed some light on training more skilful teachers in geography education.

Key Words

Geography Education, Teacher Training, Problems of Geography Education.

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In Turkey, teacher training has been carried out in universities since 1982. Teacher training has been achieved through four year undergraduate education programs in education faculties and one-and-a-half-year master's programs (non-thesis) in educational sciences institutes. When the teacher education programs are reviewed, it is observed that geography courses, especially at the under-graduate level, are included in teacher training programs of geography, primary school, and social studies (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [YÖK], 2007). Geography courses in these programs are among the courses providing teacher trainees field knowledge and general culture. With the geography education, teacher trainees are expected to have a grasp of the knowledge and opinions about global problems of which the whole world and all human beings are concerned about such as famine, drought, global warming, climate changes, desertification, and retrogression. Moreover, these teacher trainees are expected to analyze events and problems from a wide and multi-dimensional perspective (Sharma, & Elbow, 2000; Şahin, 2003).

Within the framework of restructuring studies in faculties of education, initiated in the 1998-1999 academic-year, there has been a growing interest in field teaching courses and school practicum in teacher training programs. The optimum qualities of teacher training programs are determined by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) in Turkey. These qualities include sufficient amount of qualified teaching staff, education which provides the necessary knowledge and skills, sufficient amount of skilful students, facilities such as classrooms, libraries, computers, etc., qualified management, and a quality warranty system which is used to revise and improve the teacher training program (YÖK, 1999). For this reason, geography education, in this study, is taken into account from different aspects such as the teaching staff, programs, teaching-learning process and environment, textbooks, the readiness level of teacher trainees, and the views of managers about geography education.

Some recent studies have revealed various problems in Geography education (Akınoğlu, 2005; Kayan, 2000; Koçman, 1999; Şahin, 2001, 2003). This study aims at understanding the problems and proposing possible suggestions to solve the detected problems of geography education in teacher training by taking the views of geography teachers. It is hoped that the determined problems and suggestions would contribute to the success of geography education and educating more skilful teachers.

Method

Participants

16 volunteer instructors teaching geography courses in 11 different universities in Turkey participated in the study. When demographic information about these instructors is taken into consideration, it is seen that one instructor works at the Ministry of National Education and another at a faculty of science and letters. Other participants work at the departments of primary and secondary teacher training programs of various education faculties. 10 of the participants are males and 6 are females. These teachers have teaching experience between 7-34 years.

Data Collection

A survey model was used in the study. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews which is one of the qualitative research techniques (Bogdan, & Biklen, 1992; Yıldırım, & Şimşek, 2006). The interview form consisted of two parts. The first part inquired personal information and the second part covered the interview questions. The interview questions were prepared by referring the opinions of the experts in the field. The interviews were held in the summer of 2007. A pilot interview was carried out with one of the instructors. Following the pilot study, necessary changes were done in the form and questions and, finally, interviews were carried out. Each interview took 20 minutes on average. The interviews were audio recorded.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data of the research were analyzed through descriptive analysis method. The reliability was calculated by $\text{Reliability} = \frac{\text{Agreement}}{\text{Agreement} + \text{Disagreement}} \times 100$ formula (Miles, & Huberman, 1994), and the inter-rater reliability was measured as 99.06%.

Results and Discussion

In this study, the existing problems of geography education and possible suggestions to these problems were determined by taking the views of instructors who carry out geography education in various universities in Turkey.

One of the results of the study reveals the problems of geography teaching in teacher training programs in Turkey. Research in the literature also supports the finding mentioned above. It is clear that there are problems related to the quality of the instructors in the field and that these instructors are not sufficient about field knowledge and education (Koçman, & Sutgıby, 2004; Öztürk, 2004; Şahin, 2003; Taş, 2006; Tomal, 2004). The suggestions made by the participants are of importance in that they reveal the need for in-service training. The research in the literature also supports this finding. There is an obvious need for studies to improve the qualifications of the instructors. In other words, all instructors should be equipped with pedagogical formation and should be provided with opportunities for in-service teacher training (Demiralp, 2007; Healey, 2003; Kirman, 2007; Öztürk, 2002; Sekeres and Gregg, 2008; Şahin, 2001; Tomal, 2004; Türkoğlu, 1987).

The quality of a teacher is highly important in education; therefore, the quality of teachers is dependent on the people who educate them. Thus, the suggestions made concerning the instructors are very important to achieve success in geography education and to educate more qualified teachers.

Another result, gathered through the interviews is about the programs related to geography courses. Studies have put forward that there are various shortcomings and scientific mistakes in geography education programs ranging from primary education to higher education (Kızılcıaoğlu, 2006; Şahin, 2003). First, it is seen that geography teaching programs prepared by the Ministry of National Education (MEB) is not consistent with university geography teaching programs. Secondly, the subject matters of geography teaching programs have been taken into consideration according to the interest areas of instructors instead of the real needs of the programs (Şahin, 2003). Additionally, studies in the literature suggest that the programs have objectives and contents that do not serve for educating people that our era requires, there are no applied courses (Akınoğlu, 2005; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2004; Güngördü, 2002), and the course contents are dense and the allocated time is insufficient (Akınoğlu, 2005; Paradis, & Dexter, 2007; Sekin, & Ünlü, 2002; Şahin, 2001, 2006; Vodenska, 2004). As a result of the study, suggestions were gathered related to the programs concerning geography education. Scientific studies in the literature are in accordance with the suggestions brought about through the study. The programs should

be prepared professionally (Akinoğlu, 2005, p. 94), and there should be coordination between designers and practitioners (Healey, 2003; Sekin, & Ünlü, 2002). Programs should be student-centered (Elton, 2001), supply the necessities of the age and the country (Akengin, 2007) and there should be applied courses (Akinoğlu, 2005; Cohen et al., 2004). In addition, all teacher training programs should have Geography courses (Özav, 2001; Ünlü, & Alkış, 2005).

Programs are the road-maps showing teachers the way to follow. The more teachers are prepared professionally, the more chance that they have to achieve success in education. Programs should serve the needs that are the prerequisites of the era and the country in terms of aims, contents, time, teaching-learning processes, activities, and evaluation procedures. Changing programs consistently and especially while they are still in process causes negativity for teachers and students in Turkey. For this reason, programs should be negotiated in all aspects, the scientific process and time should be considered, and there should not be drastic changes.

Another result of the study is related to teacher trainees. Problems concerning teacher trainees were determined according to the views of the instructors in the study. The results of the other studies in literature are in parallel with the results of the current study. That is, students cannot relate things they learned with the real life and they consider geography courses as boring (Akinoğlu, 2005). Teachers' low readiness level also affects geography learning negatively (Akengin, & Kayalı, 2003; Akinoğlu, & Bakır, 2003). Also Kurt's (2001) study indicates that teacher trainees' readiness level is not adequate. In general, many graduates experience anxiety about unemployment (Koçman and Sutgibi, 2004).

The finding concerning the low motivation of teacher trainees related to anxiety about job opportunities is very interesting. Although Turkey has a young generation, there are problems in terms of future planning of human resources. As this is the case, young people from all the job groups including teachers are experiencing anxiety about employment. This problem could be solved with appropriate long-term country-specific policies. However, in short term, the anxiety that teacher trainees experience might be lowered by making them to be aware of new opportunities and with the help of practices that will increase their self-confidence. On the other hand, teacher trainees' interest in geography courses is very important in order to be an appropriate role model for

their students and lead them to be interested in geography. Studies assert that the interest students have for the course increases the durability of the knowledge they acquire in the course (Akengin, & Kayalı, 2003; Akınoğlu, 2005, p. 80). Thus, there should be activities which will increase student interest in geography courses.

Another result of this study is the problems experienced in teaching-learning process in geography education in teacher training and the suggestions in solving the problems. Studies in the literature support the results of this study about the problems concerning teaching-learning process in geography education as follows: The needs of teacher trainees are not considered, teaching process does not fulfill the objectives and it directs students to memorization. Student-centered approaches are not used and tools are not utilized (Akınoğlu, & Bakır, 2003, p. 83-106; Öztürk, 2002; Sekin, & Ünlü, 2002; Şahin, 2003; Vodenska, 2004), and there are no fieldwork or trips (Öztürk, 2004; Paradis, & Dexter, 2007; Tomal, 2004).

Various suggestions are gathered concerning the teaching-learning process. These suggestions are also supported by the literature. According to researchers, there should be various methods and approaches which are student-centered and suitable for the era such as constructive, problem-based, drama etc. (Akengin, & Kayalı, 2003; Bednarz, 2002; Cohen et al., 2004; Doğanay, 2002; Healey, 2003; Karasu, & Ünlü, 2005; Kirshberg, 2000, p. 11; Köseoğlu, & Ünlü, 2006; Smith, 2005). Computers, the Internet, maps, pictures, and drawings should be used (Roschelle, Pea, Hoadley, Gordin, & Means, 2000; Üçışık et al., 2002; Üçışık, & Tuna, 2004; Ünlü et al., 2002). In teaching, Geographical Information System (GIS) and Global Visualization Viewer (GloVis) should be used (Campbell, 2007, p. 241; McClurg, & Buss, 2007; Milson, & Earle, 2007; Vodenska, 2004; West, 2003), trips and observations, and fieldwork should be organized (Ellis, & Rindfleisch, 2006; Garipağaoğlu, 2001; Kent, Gilbertson, & Hunt, 1997; Nairn, 2003; Paradis, & Dexter, 2007; Robson, 2002). Teaching-learning process is highly important in terms of educational quality and success. The suggestions concerning teaching-learning process will lead to more working solutions in geography education.

In the results of the study, problems and suggestions related to the teaching-learning setting are also covered. Among the problems stated in the literature, the following are noticeable: Classroom settings are not suit-

able for geography education. There are no geography classrooms. There is no sufficient equipment to be used in geography education. Classes are over populated and physical environment is not suitable. Teachers are not able to create interesting learning environments (Akinoğlu, 2005; Akinoğlu, & Bakır, 2003, p. 83-106; Güngördü, 2002; Koçman, & Sutgıby, 2004; Öztürk, 2002; Sekin, & Ünlü, 2002; Şahin, 2001; Voden-ska, 2004). The suggestions made by the instructors in the study related to teaching-learning environment emphasize the importance of the richness of teaching-learning environments with equipment, technical facilities, map rooms, geography classes, and laboratories (Akengin, & Kayalı, 2003; Akinoğlu, 2005; Bednarz, 2002; Campbell, 2007; Cohen et al., 2004; Cuningham, 2005; Ellis, & Rindfleisch, 2006; Güngördü, 2002; Healey, 2003; Öztürk, 2002; Sekin, & Ünlü, 2002; Svingen, 1994; Şahin, 2003; Ünlü, 2001). Instructors have a very important role in this respect. Instructors should spend sufficient effort and be a model for teacher trainees both in creating suitable and rich teaching-learning environments in geography teaching and using the most effective methods and approaches in teaching-learning process.

The problems and suggestions, which are identified in the study, concerning textbooks are also supported by the studies in the related literature. The studies have put forward that there are various problems related to the format and content of the geography textbooks in Turkey (Demirci, 2003; Demirkaya, & Tomal, 2002; Güngördü, 2002; Sekin, & Ünlü, 2002; Şahin, 2001, 2003; Yaşar, 2005). Textbooks should be scientific and contemporary in terms of format and content, be compatible with geography teaching programs and make students active participants, help them gain skills of research, be critical thinkers, and provide a set of exercise books, guide books and CD ROMs (Demiralp, 2007; Donert, 1990; Waugh, 2000; Waugh & Bushell, 2002; Winter, 1996). The shortcomings of the geography textbooks in terms of format and content should be eliminated, mistakes should be corrected, and these books should be made compatible with scientific criteria both for the field and general education.

The results of the study are also important in terms of revealing the problems that instructors experience with administrators and understanding the point of views of the administrators about geography education. The suggestions made by the instructors will be helpful in solving the problems. In most of the developed countries, national ge-

ography organizations have applications that support the geography education in faculties (Bednarz, Burkill, Lidstone, & Rawling, 2000; Gardner, 2000; Healey, 2003). With the help of these applications, improvements can be achieved in geography education and the quality of instructors may be increased. In Turkey, university and faculty managements should provide necessary support to establish geography classes and laboratories, improve physical conditions, and organize trips and fieldworks. Moreover, the Turkish Geography Association and related affiliations should make efficient research in order to make geography education more qualified.

Problems related to national policies and teacher training system in terms of geography education are also revealed in the study. In teacher education system, it is known that a lot of changes have been made without careful planning. However, policies applied for overcoming problems are highly important (Gibson, 2007; Healey, 2003). Teacher education programs should be inspected and observed problems should be solved. In this respect, within the framework of restructuring studies in faculties of education, starting from the 1998-1999 academic year, it has become quite important that the YÖK and World Bank should put "Pre-Service Teacher Training Program" in practice (YÖK, 2007). The findings suggest that it is important to prevent anxiety for academic achievement of instructors in faculties of education instead of their teacher training duties. All the efforts spent in more qualified teacher education should be evaluated in terms of academic achievement criteria and instructors should be encouraged to educate skilful teachers. Conferences, symposiums, and seminars about the problems experienced in geography education and possible suggestions for solutions will help geography education in Turkey and will make it more qualified in order to reach at the desired level.

Consequently, views of instructors, problems and solution suggestions related to geography education have been determined in this study. Various problems concerning instructors, geography lesson programs, teacher trainees, teaching-learning process and environment, textbooks, administrators, and other subjects have also been revealed. Suggestions made by the instructors towards the existing problems are of crucial importance to make geography education more qualified.

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