

EVALUATION OF THE DISTANCE EDUCATION PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' OPINIONS ABOUT TEACHING PRACTICE COURSE (CASE OF IZMIR CITY)

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to determine the distance education pre-service teachers' opinions about the teaching practice course. The study was conducted with descriptive method. For data collection, analysis and interpretation, qualitative research method was used. Out of the students enrolled at Open Education Faculty, Department of Pre-school Education and Department of English Language Teaching, 27 students were volunteer to participate to the study. As a result of the study; it was found that some of the distance education pre-service teachers felt ready and enthusiastic about the teaching practice course albeit others did not feel ready enough.

In addition, the pre-service teachers mostly mentioned about their expectations for self-development and self-evaluation. The pre-service teachers considered that this course provided them the opportunities to know the students and learning environments, also to prepare the plans effectively, to learn about teaching-learning processes, to manage class and time, to benefit from coordinator teachers and to evaluate themselves. However, they also complained about lack of information about plans and teaching practice files, difficulties in class-management, problems in efficient time-management, indifference of the coordinator teachers, inadequate equipment at application schools; lack of supervision and limited opportunity to have experience.

Thus, they suggested that the coordinator teachers should be trained considering these problems also the application should be selected after physical check; besides the pre-service teachers should be supervised and provided accurate samples about plan and field preparation, thus frequent contact meetings should be arranged.

Keywords: Distance Education; Teacher training; Teaching Practice

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important investments in a society is the education investment. All of the societies at contemporary civilization level accept education as the ley to the development. Along with the proclamation of the Republic in Turkey, the main aim of the education is to train individuals who are ready to service; producer; hardworking; disciplined; free; virtuous; self-confident and relying on country (Saglam, 2007).

In this sense, there is a need for education with the quality of addressing to rapidly changing and developing information context, also teachers that are well-educated and qualified enough to train the individuals equipped with the requirements of the era are necessary. Teachers are the important components of education and the more conscious and effective they are trained, the more they could train the individuals who own the future, search, think, question, produce and learn lifelong. To enable teachers to gain the individuals these features, it is important to train them with an understanding based on the integrity of theory and application.

In order to increase the quality of pre-service teachers training in Turkey, "School Experience I, II and Teaching Practice" courses have been involved in the programs of all departments at Education Faculties at the universities since 1997-1998 academic year. With School Experience I, it is aimed to introduce the pre-service teachers the school, students and teaching professions in company with a coordinator teacher from different perspectives, as soon as possible. In the same way, School Experience II includes observations and applications (asking questions while teaching, instruction and explanations, class and course management, examining a student from different aspects, evaluating students' works, lesson planning, using course books, group works, class order, preparing and using worksheets) with a again a coordinator teachers in order to provide a basis for Teaching Practice. On the other hand, Teaching Practice course is defined as the application, seminar, of two-hour teaching practice that helps the pre-service teachers gain the teaching skills in a class and teaching a certain lesson or teaching lessons according to plans, then evaluate and share the practice (Higher Education Institution, 1998).

One of the most important courses that the pre-service teachers take is Teaching Practice. With this course, the pre-service teachers get the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge at the real teaching-learning environment. Additionally, they learn to behave as teachers. The application process has the functional role for the pre-service teacher to understand the relationship between theory and application (Güçlü & Güçlü, 1996). The pre-service teachers learn about teaching profession not only at the theoretical process but also at the application process. This is crucial to train the pre-service teachers as sophisticated thinker and practitioner in a context which aims not only for the education but also the professional development of the pre-service teachers (Külahlıoğlu, 2000). In this way, the pre-service teachers could get ready for the profession, develop the goals and have the opportunities to apply the method and techniques.

As Ozen et al (2009) cited from Conderman et al (2005), there are many factors influencing the teaching practice as listed in the following:

- **The content of teacher training program**
- **The competencies and knowledge of the coordinator teacher at the practice class**
- **The competencies of the university supervisors**
- **The features of the practice school**
- **The pre-service teacher's own educational experience**
- **The pre-service teacher's own knowledge**

Each of these factors could affect the pre-service teacher's success and failure during teaching practice process. Thus, it is important to take into consideration such factors.

In order to make up the teacher shortage at the Pre-school Education and English Language Teaching fields, distance education programs for Pre-school Education and English Language teaching were started at Anadolu University as a result of the agreement with the Ministry of Education in 2000. These distant programs are equal to formal undergraduate programs at Education Faculties. Thus, the pre-service teachers at these distance education programs are responsible with the courses that are compulsory at the formal education programs. School Experience and Teaching Practice courses have important roles in this process. In fact, the mandatory attendance at these courses can be perceived as the indicator of the significance. In this way, the students could participate to the application process at real schools and have school experience. On the other hand, many studies conducted on the School Experience and Teaching Practice at Education Faculties emphasized the effectiveness of these courses to gain the pre-service teachers the desired behaviors as well as the encountered problems. Thus, they concluded that the pre-service teachers at the formal education found the effectiveness of these courses inadequate or the coordinator teachers evaluated them as failed, and the coordination between faculty-school could not be completely provided (Köroğlu, Baser and Yavuz, 2000; Ozen, Ergenekon and Batu, 2009; Silay and Gok, 2005; Paker, 2005; Aksu, 2001; Hacıoglu, 1993; Rıza and Hamurcu, 2000).

The fact that even the pre-service teachers at formal education face such problems raises the question about the distance education pre-service teachers' situation at the Teaching Practice course, which is one of the limited face-to-face courses they take at their education, or the question about their opinions on the teaching profession. The paucity on this issue in literature also strengthens the rationale of the study. Considering these needs, the aim of the study is to determine the opinions of the pre-service teachers at distance education programs about Teaching Practice course they take. In line with this aim, the following questions were addressed:

What are the distance education pre-service teachers'

- readiness level,
- expectations from the course,
- the opinions on the contribution of the course to teaching profession knowledge and skills,
- encountered problems and
- solution suggestions
- about the Teaching Practice course?

In this study, the distance education pre-service teachers' situations at the Teaching Practice course, which is one of the face-to-face courses will be described and whether these pre-service teachers encountered any problems regarding teaching practice will be found out, thus related feedback will be provided.

METHOD

The main aim of this study is to determine the distance education pre-service teachers' opinions about Teaching Practice course. To address this aim, the qualitative research method was adapted. As Yildirin and Simsek (2003) defined, this method is "the research in which qualitative data collection methods such as observation, interview and document analysis are used and the qualitative process is followed in order to reveal the perceptions and events in realistic and holistic way in a natural setting". Hence, this method could satisfy the need of probing in detail the opinions of Distance Pre-school Education and ELT pre-service teachers about Teaching Practice course.

Participants

The participants of the study consisted of the fourth year students of Distance Pre-school Education and ELT students, who were taking the Teaching Practice course in 2008-2009 academic years in Izmir. For the interviews, as the data collection instrument, the students were got in touch on telephone by authorized personnel at student affairs. After informing about the aim, content and data collection, the volunteer students were determined and the contact information were given. As a result, 32 pre-service teachers contacted with the researcher, but 29 of them could participate to the interviews since the other three students could not participate due to their work loads. Their desires to send their opinions via e-mails were not accepted considering the reliability of the study. 13 of the participants were enrolled at the Distance English Language Teaching while 16 of them were at Distance Pre-school Education program. For the anonymity of the participants, their names were not used while discussing the findings.

Data Collection Process and Techniques

Semi-structured interviews were used to determine the distance education pre-service teachers' opinions about Teaching Practice course.

Interview is a rich data collection technique that provides opportunity to ask extra questions for detailed data, to intervene the misunderstanding immediately, to have more responses and to observe un verbal behaviors as well (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006). In the semi-structured interviews used in this study, the researcher prepares the interview questions beforehand. However, the researcher can ask extra questions considering flow of the interview or the content of the responses, also the researcher could do additional explanation or change the order of the questions (Ekiz, 2003). The reason why this technique was used in this study is the necessity for the structure to ask extra questions and/or to make explanations.

On the basis of semi-structured interview format, an interview form was prepared, and then for the validity of the study, two experts' opinions about the form were asked. According to their opinions, the final version of interview form was prepared (App. 1). Then, the instructors to participate to the interviews were determined. Lastly, to ensure the reliability of the study, consent forms for the interviewee were prepared and presented for their signs before the interviews.

The interviews were conducted by the first researcher in July 2008 in Open Education Faculty Office in Izmir, Bornova. As a result of interviews, totally, 443.97 minute audio record was collected.

Data Analysis

For data analysis of the study, descriptive data analysis method, out of qualitative data analysis approaches, was applied. This method can generally be used when the related theoretical framework of the study is certain.

The data obtained according to this analysis approach can be either interpreted after summarized by the predetermined themes or after forming the themes according to the interview questions. With descriptive analysis, the data is described systematically and then the descriptions are explained, the cause-effect relations are questioned; consequently several conclusions can be drawn (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006). In the study, the data collected with the interviews are firstly transcribed as regards to the descriptive analysis. As a result, 190 pages transcriptions were obtained. The truthfulness and validity of the audio records were ensured by the first and second researchers. For this, the researchers listened to one of the audio records randomly and checked whether the transcriptions were correct or not.

After this checking process, the data got prepared for the analysis. To construct a framework for the descriptive analysis, the research questions were used as bases. So, the arranged interview data were read by the first and second researchers independently and codes were determined again independently. The research questions of the study were examined and discussed one by one considering these two different coding key by two researchers and finally a consensus was reached. The codes were reduced and compiled, and then the themes and sub-themes were formed. Finally, the data for each theme were determined, the similarities and differences among each independent grouping were examined.

Till reaching agreement, the discussion on themes and sub-themes continued. As a result of the process, 5 themes were determined, however, two more themes were also emerged although they were not among the research questions.

The themes emerged considering the research questions were "Readiness Situation", "Expectation from the Course", "Contribution of the Course", "Problems" and "Solution Suggestions". In addition, the other two themes were "Community Service Application" and "The Differences between the Formal and Distance Education". Some striking opinions for each finding were detected during this description process. These opinions were used as direct quotations to support the findings. At these quotations, the real names were not used for the anonymity of the participants but the numbers were used for them. At the last stage, the described findings were interpreted so as to reveal the participants' opinions. For data analysis, nVivo 8.0 was used.

FINDINGS and INTERPRETATIONS

In the following; the findings on the distance education pre-service teachers' opinions about teaching practice are in presented in respect to the research questions.

The Readiness Level of Distance Education Pre-service Teachers

The first research question of the study was related to the readiness level of the distance education pre-service teachers. The findings regarding this question were gathered under two titles as "feeling ready" and "not feeling ready".

The distance education students, who felt ready for teaching practice, believed that they could achieve what they felt adequate and they explained that they went for the practice willingly as equipped with knowledge acquired from books, friends. One of the students, who felt ready for this course, explained that:

"I felt ready, of course I am not perfect, but I certainly felt ready and adequate". Another student stated that "I willingly and purposely went for practice. Willingly, I tried to read each book attempting to internalize everything, I thought I should learn this, it should be like this so I tried to learn and read by heart."

In addition to the students who felt ready for the teaching practice, there were students who did not feel ready for the practice. These students explained that they did not feel ready for the practice due to being away from studentship and personal problems as feeling inadequate and unready. One of these students emphasized that *"during the distance education process after formal education process, they felt as being away from the school so they considered as if they were not students anymore"* so he stated that he was not ready for the practice. On the other hand, another student claimed that *"no matter what kind of education is provided, nobody can be completely ready for this lesson"*.

However, the pre-service teachers, who felt extremely anxious and excited about the course at first, stated that while they did not feel ready at the beginning, after the first lesson they could control their excitement and they felt ready at last.

The Distance Education Pre-service Teachers' Expectations from the Teaching Practice Course The second research question of the study was regarding the distance education pre-service teachers' expectations from the teaching practice course. The related findings were grouped under two themes as "self-development" and "self-evaluation".

The pre-service teachers had expectations on self-development such as having experience, being an efficient teacher and applying theoretical knowledge of teaching profession. Under this theme, they explained their desire to be ready; therefore they expected to gain experience so they explained these opinions as spending time with students, knowing them, observing and making benefit from the cooperating teacher. One of these pre-service teachers stated that *"I want to graduate as a teacher"*. Additionally, the pre-service teachers, who expressed the expectation of being an effective teacher, explained that they sought the answers to the questions of how to benefit to students and how to teach the students. Some of the students expressed their expectations to apply their knowledge regarding teaching profession. One of these students explained that *"I firstly aimed to observe the theoretical information about teaching profession from the instructors"*.

Regarding the expectations on self-evaluation, the pre-service teachers questioned about how appropriate teaching profession is for them and whether they had any rough edges. Under this theme, one of the students answered about the appropriacy of the profession as;

"My accurate aim was to evaluate myself whether I am ready for teaching profession, I can accomplish this profession I am equipped enough and whether it is the right profession or not".

Another student stated that

"I expected to see my missing points." In addition to all these opinions, one of the pre-service teachers stated that *"he does not have any expectation from this course"*.

The Contribution of the Teaching Practice Course

The third research question of the study was about the contribution of the teaching practice to pre-service teachers. In this context, the participants' responses were gathered under eight main themes: "knowing students", "environment", "teaching-learning process", "time-classroom management", "mentor teacher", "self-evaluation", and "general ideas".

For the theme of knowing students, the pre-service teachers in the study explained some contributions such as knowing students with different learning features and learning to give chance to students.

In this regard, one of the pre-service teachers expressed that *"normally I thought I would see them as the same person when I come into the class but different answers are coming from each. While planning at home, I think about questions and I consider the answers can be like this and these but children give so different answers..."*.

Furthermore, the pre-service teachers underlined that the teaching practice course contributes them in terms of environment as it helps them see different environments and evaluate the features of the environment. For instance, one of the pre-service teachers stated that

"It is a great course, you can understand that, I mean, if you want you can manage everything because we develop body language, plant trees, grow many plants....we have to enlarge our vision..."

Regarding the contribution of plan, the pre-service teachers explained that teaching without plan is not effective, thus, it is crucial to teach lessons in line with a plan, apply plans in the class. Besides, they stated that thanks to the teaching practice course, they have experience about how to teach lessons according to a plan.

They also understand the significance of preparing plans beforehand and following the plans in the class in order to detect the deficiencies of children, in addition they underlined that preparing a plan is a difficult task and it is essential to prepare a flexible plan. For example, one of the pre-service teachers stated that

"well it contributes to me to make a plan, follow this plan and realize the children's needs and try to compensate them"

Regarding the contribution of the teaching practice course to the teaching-learning process, the distance education pre-service teachers mentioned about the implementations of activities, use of different techniques and techniques, providing the flexibility according to the class, applying theoretical knowledge, having experience about teaching students how to learn, learning about how to teach in the class, and drawing students' attention. In this sense, one pre-service teacher explained that

"...I chose the activities by drawing children's attention. I tried to apply different activities every day. I made experiments...."

Another pre-service teacher stated that *"I involved other activities such free time activity and art techniques."*

Another contribution that the pre-service teachers emphasized was time-classroom management. It was underlined that the teaching practice course enables the pre-service teachers to have classroom management, learn about the communication ways, learn about how to speak and behave in the class, get ready for any unexpected events in the class and allocate time effectively. In this regard, one pre-service teacher expressed that

"I learned how to manage 30 students. I generally managed to draw their attention..." Likewise, another student reported that

"Classroom management, especially for dividing the lessons into sessions and managing the time effectively..."

Moreover, related to the contribution of mentor teachers during teaching practice, the pre-service teachers explained that these teachers contributed them to share their knowledge; also they teach them to be patient and help them about everything, besides give beneficial feedback. Regarding this, one of the pre-service teachers expressed that

"She guided me very very very effectively...", similarly another pre-service teachers stated that *"my mentor teacher was very good and interested. I think she contributed me a lot..."*

The pre-service teachers also expressed the contributions of the teaching practice course for their self-evaluation. Thanks to this course, they considered themselves as teachers also they feel as developed, competent and professionally improved. Besides, their experience and their realization about teaching profession were enhanced. In contrast to such positive evaluations, the pre-service teachers had some negative evaluations such not allocating enough time for teaching practice and not feeling as successful. Regarding self-evaluation, some pre-service teachers considered themselves as successful and they mentioned that they gained a lot. One pre-service teacher stated that

"I could feel as a teacher. I mean, there is a great difference between studying and applying...", another one expressed that *"I could be a teacher any more"*. On the other hand, a pre-service teacher, who though the teaching practice did not contribute so much, reported that *"In fact, I did not learn much"*.

Lastly, for the theme of general opinions about the contributions of teaching practice course, the pre-service teachers mentioned about its effectiveness, usefulness, its contribution to research, applying theory to application, compensating the deficiencies, gaining experience and creativity, giving chance to be together with teachers and students, besides, teaching them how to behave as a teacher. For instance, one of the pre-service teachers explained that *"I think it is very beneficial because if just start teaching after school, we could be shocked, in my opinion it would be very beneficial for the experience at high school in İzmir, for example..."*.

The Problems Encountered at the Teaching Practice Course

The fourth research question of the study was about the problems encountered at the teaching practice course. The participants' answers were gathered under nine main themes as "preparing teaching practice file", "planning", "duration of time", "practice way", "classroom management", "practice school", "mentor teacher", "control" and "others".

Firstly, regarding the themes of preparing teaching practice file, the pre-service teachers expressed that they had difficulty with preparing the file, in addition, writing reports takes long time, the reports costs a lot and the reports are not so persuasive. In other words, the pre-service teachers emphasized that they had troubles while preparing the teaching practice reports. For instance, one of the pre-service teachers stated that:

"reports were big struggles for us, writing them every week was really a big trouble because it could be eight or ten pages long".

Another theme that indicates the distance education pre-service teachers experienced a lot of problems during the teaching practice course were planning. Under this theme, the pre-service teachers mentioned about not having pleasure while planning but having difficulty to prepare plans for the students with different learning difficulties, being waste of time, not applying all the plans all the time, having troubles while preparing the plans with other pre-service teachers and not knowing how to prepare the plans. One of the pre-service explained these problems as *"It did not occur as I expected. I could not apply my plan exactly..."*, likewise, another pre-service teachers stated that *"frankly speaking, everything does not happen as planned"*.

Regarding the theme of duration of practice, the pre-service teachers mentioned the problems of allocating the duration of activities, time management problems and lack of time. One of the pre-service teachers explained the problem of time management problems as *"20 minutes are not enough at all"*.

Another pre-service teacher added that *"once I could not manage time effectively, for five minutes I did not know what to do"*.

For the way of practice, the pre-service teachers explained the problems of going for teaching practice at different classes, having many pre-service teachers in class, teaching the same plan by two pre-service teachers, not applying effectively, having difficulty with the different methods-techniques, not applying all the plans due to a large number of pre-service teachers and having an obligation to follow the mentor teachers' methods. One of the problems most frequently mentioned by the pre-service teachers is about having too many pre-service teachers in the class. One of the pre-service teachers explained this as

"In fact there are a lot of pre-service teachers. Children use this and they are really naughty. They do not listen to us. Everybody talks at the same time...It happens because of the pre-service teachers so we have a lot of problems..."

Another theme that covers the problems of pre-service teachers is classroom management. Under this theme, the pre-service teachers explained the problems of not achieving the outcomes related to classroom management, not having discipline in the class, not communicating with students, and not being respected as a teacher by students.

One of the pre-service teachers, who experienced difficulty in classroom management, stated that *"we could not manage, in fact the class is crowded, we were pre-service teachers and they did not listen to us..."*

Furthermore, the problems under the theme of practice school were listed as being very far, having limited facilities, lack of equipment and having some administration problems. Regarding the problem of limited facilities, one of the pre-service teachers explained that:

"My teaching practice school was limited in terms of facilities...."
besides another student stated that "I live in İzmir; I go to Urla every morning. I stay for two hours there and then return to Bornova...it was tiring".

Another theme that involves the most of the problems the pre-service teachers encountered during the course is mentor teachers. The pre-service teachers particularly complained that the mentor teachers had strict attitudes and they did not guide enough.

Furthermore, they stated that these teachers considered the lessons that the pre-service teachers practiced as not taught, besides they left them alone and even ignored them. It was also complained that the mentor teachers did not have enough knowledge about the reports and they could not guide them effectively. Moreover, the pre-service teachers stated that these teachers always criticized them negatively, even humiliated them and threaten them.

It was also claimed that the mentor teachers did not take the teaching practice course serious and they gave orders to teachers by insisting on the use of their own methods. The pre-service teachers criticized the mentor teachers since they behaved as if a university supervisors instead of guiding mentor teacher.

The pre-service teachers complained about being compared with other pre-service teachers, also being evaluated by different mentors at different classes, besides being perceived as if an inspector, so causing bad relationships with children. Moreover, the mentor teachers were criticized due to their resistance against different approaches and lack of knowledge about modern approaches.

Regarding the problems experienced with the mentor teachers, one of the pre-service teachers reported that:

"we always went there but I think the teachers did not care about it. In fact, they wished as we had not come, I think..." Another pre-service teacher similarly stated that *"I had five classes in a day. The teachers did not stay in the class. In each class, different teachers evaluated me. I had many troubles. I was threatened. My mentor teacher always ordered me..."*

The last theme covering the problems that the pre-service teachers experienced during the course is control.

Regarding this issue, the pre-service teachers complained about not being controlled enough since there were some students who did not attend to the teaching practice but got successful. For instance, one of the pre-service teachers stated that:

"...I always attended to the lessons and I did my responsibility. However, we had some friends who went school once during the term but got 90 while I got 90. Even they never went in fact..."

Under the theme of others that involves the problems different from aforementioned ones, it was mentioned that some pre-service teachers did not satisfy their expectations and had many problems during the process; also they could not learn much and evaluated the course as inadequate in terms of the outcomes for teaching profession. Moreover, some pre-service teachers complained about having inadequate experience, also teaching practice was defined as difficult and involving many redundant aspects. One of the pre-service teachers, who thought the course did not contribute a lot, explained that:

"...frankly speaking, I think I did not improve my theoretical knowledge at all...". Similarly another pre-service teacher expressed that *"Well, in fact, of course it has contributions, contributions to me. However, there are some redundant aspects ...so I did not find this method so effective..."*.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SOLUTION

The last research question was about the distance education pre-service teachers' solution suggestions for the teaching practice. Therefore, the pre-service teachers' answers were gathered under six main themes; namely, "about the mentor teacher", "about the pre-service teacher", "about practice school", "about the practice file", "about supervision" and "about the course".

Regarding the problems with the mentor teacher, the pre-service teachers suggested in-service education for them and careful selection of these teachers as well as effective control mechanism on these teachers. In that sense, one pre-service teacher stated that:

"...in my opinion, the mentor teachers should be trained. In fact they know what they have to do but¹²¹ they did not do...". Another pre-service teacher added that *"Well, while selecting the mentor teachers they should be*

careful, it is very important for both teachers and pre-service teachers. As I said motivation is very important. I requested to be very careful while choosing the mentors”.

The pre-service teachers in this study suggested about the pre-service teachers within the process to have control over them and check regularly whether they attend to the lesson and teach any subject. Also, they offered to decrease the number of pre-service teachers in the classes. For instance, one of the pre-service teachers exemplified that:

“All right, what about providing the must and essential conditions at the teaching practice course? One of the most important things is, in my opinion, to have four pre-service teachers at the same class, in fact it is not a right process. You, I mean, some people from Anadolu University should check this at each city and school”.

Another theme that the pre-service teachers suggested about is practice school. Among the suggestions, there is the careful selection of practice school, opportunity to practice at different schools, control over the equipment of the schools and to choose nearby practice schools. One preschool education pre-service teachers suggested that *“...more controllable kindergartens...”*

Regarding the theme of practice file, the pre-service suggested to have more samples about the reports, not to prepare plans or make them more functional, to adapt different format of report and to submit the reports via Internet. For instance, one of the pre-service teachers stated that.

“...in my opinion the teaching practice is not difficult but this writing task is the real difficulty. Preparing the files. You write, submit. In fact, it would be more effective if we submit via Internet...I mean, well it can be all on Internet. The teachers can evaluate and send them there too...”

Moreover, the pre-service suggested about supervision that academic support should be provided to the pre-service teachers during the practice, the pre-service teachers who have problems could be got in touch and their problems should be solved, also the briefings should be arranged regularly.

On this issue, one pre-service teacher offered that:

“...one of the important, right things is perhaps to have a supervisor from the school as well as the mentor teachers; in fact they can come sometimes...”

Lastly under the theme of the teaching practice course, the pre-service teachers suggested that the teaching practice can be conducted in one term and its class hours can be increased. For instance, one of the pre-service teachers offered that *“...the class hours in a week can be increased...”*

General Opinions

Two more opinion themes were emerged although they were not among the research questions, as “Community Service Applications (CSA)” and “The Difference of Distance Education from the Formal Education”.

In this context, the opinions regarding the Community Service Applications were gathered under two main themes as "Being satisfied with CSA" and "Being unsatisfied with CSA".

Under the theme of being satisfied with CSA, the pre-service teachers stated that it was really good to be together more, also, in this course, they learned that they could achieve if they want.

Moreover, some pre-detachers claimed that CSA course was more effective and beneficial than the teaching practice course; they had more competent teachers, they criticized and guided effectively.

They stated that they had difficulty but they learned a lot so they were very satisfied. They learned different techniques. They also emphasized that the CSA course should not be excluded from the program. More specifically, one pre-service teachers explained her satisfaction as:

"For CSA, we went to a different teacher. On Monday, from three to five, we went for normal application and on Thursday, from 1 to 5 pm with a different teacher. I am really satisfied with Community Service Application course but I was not so satisfied with the teaching practice course in fact..." Likewise, another pre-service teacher mentioned that *"CSA was really beneficial. We gave lessons to students who could not go to any private courses, we try to make up their deficiencies or we tried to teach them anything. Because you know, there is shortage of English teachers at schools"*.

On the other hand, the pre-service teachers explained the reasons for not being satisfied with CSA course as CSA was difficult, and it took a lot of time, it was not necessary. Besides, they complained that with CSA course, their teaching practice was doubled and they did not what to do in this course since it was the first year of application. One of the pre-service teachers explained their problems that *"I mean, frankly speaking, it was an unnecessary course. Because we did the same things at the first term of the teaching practice, except the information. We did it last year too. We applied one activity. I do not know it was unnecessary for me. My other friends also agreed with me"*.

Regarding the difference between the distance and formal education, two main themes were emerged as "There is a difference" and "There is no difference".

The pre-service teachers, who thought that *there is* no difference between the distance and formal education, mentioned that they had no difference between the formal education students and themselves in terms of either knowledge or other things. Some considered that they improved themselves more than many formal education pre-service teachers as they searched a lot and they were more ambitious and they were more effective in the teaching practice since they had more chances for the practice. One of the pre-service teachers stated that *"I never think that there is a difference between the formal and distance education"*.

On the contrary, the pre-service teachers who considered that *there was* a difference, complained that the formal education pre-service teachers could access to the instructors more easily but the distance education pre-service teachers were more alone so they had more difficulties. Some pre-service teachers claimed that the formal education pre-service teachers know more. Lastly, they complained that the distance education pre-service teachers are evaluated only by the mentor teachers.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The present study, which aimed to determine the distance education pre-service teachers' perspectives about the teaching practice course, drew conclusions in line with the research questions. Addressing the first research question, the distance pre-service teachers' readiness levels were examined and found out that some of the distance education pre-service teachers in the study felt ready and willing for the teaching practice course while the others were not so ready.

This finding is consistent with Silay and Gök's (2005) study in which also some pre-service teachers felt ready while the rest did not feel so.

The significance factor for the readiness level of the distance pre-service teachers is that they might have teaching experience before this course (The English Language Teaching pre-service teachers attending to the distance education program could work at schools beginning from the third year of school. Similarly, the preschool pre-service teachers might practice while at the Child Development program of high school and during their part time jobs at schools). However, there were some pre-service teachers who did not feel ready for the teaching practice, this finding emphasized the necessity to motivate and prepare the pre-service teachers for this practice. Therefore, briefing meetings for the pre-service teachers, more detailed course books for teaching profession courses and supports from the instructors at Education Faculty could be suggested.

Through the second research question, the distance education pre-service teachers' expectations for the teaching practice were examined. The results of the analysis on the pre-service teachers' responses indicated that they had expectations for their self-development. Additionally, some pre-service teachers had self-development expectations. The pre-service teachers could learn the fine details related to teaching profession at schools. Thus, it is quite important for the pre-service teachers to attend to the teaching practice course. This finding of the study implied that the distance education pre-service teachers developed awareness about this issue.

Another research question of the study investigated the contributions of the teaching practice course to the pre-service teachers. The findings indicated that this course had some expectations such as enabling the pre-service teachers to know students and learning environments, to prepare the plans effectively, to learn about teaching-learning process, to establish classroom-management, to benefit from the mentor teachers at schools and to develop themselves. Some of these findings are supported with the findings of Köroğlu, Başer and Yavuz's (2000) study. In their study, it was found that more than half of the pre-service teachers considered developing about teaching programs, their applications, course books, students' portfolios and measurement-evaluation at the end of the teaching practice. Moreover, Özen, Ergenekon and Batu (2009) detected that majority of the pre-service teachers had positive feedback from the mentor teachers. The finding of the present study, which indicated that the pre-service teachers defined the mentor teachers as guides, is consistent with Özen et al's study.

Regarding the problems that the pre-service teachers in the present study encountered during the teaching practice, it was obtained that they had problems due to inadequate knowledge about preparing the plans and teaching practice files, difficulty in classroom management and time management, also inadequate interests from the mentor teachers, lack of equipment at schools and irregular control during the process and having limited experience.

These findings are supported with some related studies in literature. For instance; Silay and Gök (2005) observed that if a mentor teacher is responsible of more than one pre-service teachers, it influences the pre-service teachers' performances negatively, and due to crowded classes at practice schools, pre-service teachers' performances are also affected negatively. Moreover, Paker (2005) agreed that most of the pre-service teachers have difficulty in taking feedback from the mentor teachers. Likewise, Özen et al (2009) found out that the pre-service teachers do not have much feedback or they think that the feedback is not appropriately given and thus this influences their motivation negatively.

Additionally, Koroglu et al (2000) revealed that the pre-service teachers complain about the lack of equipment at most of the practice schools.

Thus, the pre-service teachers could not apply the alternative teaching methods and they could not choose the methods, equipment and measurements devices. Most of the mentor teachers get the pre-service to use their own methods. In light of these supporting findings of the related studies, it can be claimed that the mentor teachers should be selected among the willing ones and equipped with the competencies to be a model and guide the pre-service teachers as well as being experienced. Moreover, before assigning the pre-service teachers to schools, certain criteria should be followed and some cautions to enhance the coordination and cooperation between the schools and Open Education Faculty should be taken. The pre-service teachers should be supported to create effective learning environments and to manage the classrooms and provide students' participation during the teaching practice. When the related literature is reviewed, it can be seen that the mentor teachers should study with at least two pre-service teachers (Aksu, 2001). This assumption and the findings of the study, which emphasized a large number of pre-service teachers in class (5-6), may lead the suggestion of decreasing the number of pre-service teachers in class and giving the responsibility of three pre-service teachers to a mentor teacher.

Lastly, the pre-service teachers' suggestions for these problems were examined in the present study. According to the results, the pre-service teachers suggested to give in-service training to the mentor teachers, to control the practice schools physically first, then assign the pre-service teachers to these schools, to control the pre-service teachers regularly, to provide accurate samples for plans and files and to arrange briefing meetings. Similarly, Beck and Kosnik (2000) found that the pre-service teachers suggested to have a good model mentor teachers and to establish effective communication with them. Considering these, it can be suggested to arrange in-service trainings for the mentor teachers (Borko & Mayfield, 1995) and to motive both school administrators and mentor teachers to show positive attitudes towards teaching practice.

The results of the present study also revealed the pre-service teachers' opinions about Community Service course. Majority of the pre-service teachers considered that this course was useful for them; even it provided more creative and independent environment for their practice. On the other hand, some of the pre-service teachers claimed that this course caused much work load with the teaching practice course so they suggested having this course at a different term. Additionally, most of the pre-service teachers emphasized that they were not different from the formal education pre-service teachers even they were more willing and ambitious.

Consequently, it was determined that the distance education pre-service teachers had positive attitudes towards the teaching practice course, additionally they experienced similar problems and they had some suggestions to solve these problems.

It is important that all of the pre-service teachers except two in the study had positive attitudes and opinions about the teaching practice course at distance education. As a suggestion for further study, studies with different data collection instruments and larger population can be conducted involving both the school administrators and mentor teachers so that different perspectives on the distance education pre-service teachers and teaching practice course.

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