

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### SINIF ÖĞRETMENLERİNİN MESLEKİ GELİŞİM UYGULAMALARI İLE İLGİLİ GÖRÜŞLERİ

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**ABSTRACT:** This study investigated teachers perceptions of teacher development practices in Turkey, specifically teachers' perceptions of the existence of professional development opportunities, and availability of in-service activities and usefulness of those staff development opportunities. A survey was used to collect data. The population of this study includes all public elementary school teachers in the province of Ankara, Turkey. A representative sample of 500 subjects from 52 schools was selected.

Responses to the study questionnaire indicate that most Turkish elementary school teachers have participated in in-service training activities only once or twice during their career. The results also show that rural school teachers have been less fortunate in having access to in-service training activities than urban school teachers. The respondents overwhelmingly agreed that teachers need opportunities to improve their teaching skills and knowledge.

**KEYWORDS:** *Teaching, professional development, teacher development, teachers' perceptions, staff development, elementary school, improving teaching.*

**ÖZET:** Bu araştırma öğretmenlerin Türkiye'deki mesleki gelişim uygulamaları ile ilgili görüşlerini ve bu doğrultuda öğretmenlerin, halen var olan mesleki gelişim fırsatlarını, hizmet-içi eğitim etkinliklerinin öğretmenlere sunulma derecelerini ve yararlılıklarını incelemeye yöneliktir. Araştırmada veri toplamak için bir anket kullanılmıştır. Anket Ankara ilindeki 52 okulda 500 öğretmene uygulanmıştır.

Anket sonuçları ilköğretim öğretmenlerinin çoğunun hizmet-içi eğitim etkinliklerine bütün meslek hayatları boyunca sadece bir veya iki kez katıldıklarını göstermektedir. Bir diğer çarpıcı sonuç ta köy okullarında görevli öğretmenlerin bu konuda daha şanssız olduklarıdır. Sonuçlara göre öğretmenlerin, öğretmenlik becerilerinin geliştirilmesi için kendilerine mesleki gelişim etkinlikleri ile ilgili fırsatların sağlanması gerektiğini düşündükleri de ortaya çıkmıştır.

**ANAHTAR SÖZCÜKLER:** *Öğretme, mesleki gelişim, öğretmenlerin gelişimi, öğretmen görüşleri, personel geliştirme, ilköğretim, öğretimi geliştirme.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers and the quality of their teaching are much in the news today and are likely to keep their significance in the near future. Studies [1] tell us again and again that student performance will not improve if the quality of instruction is not improved. However, the quality of instruction in schools cannot be significantly improved without improving the quality of teachers. A teacher who has opportunities to learn and to grow can provide more opportunities for young people [2]. Therefore, supporting the continual development of teachers is important to improve the quality of teachers and the quality of their teaching.

The concept of professional development, defined as the knowledge, skills, abilities and necessary conditions for teacher learning on the job [3] has been one of the most important factors in improving education efforts. Literature on the improvement of the teaching profession suggests that professional development is a necessity for better teaching and better schools [4]. Therefore, to improve the quality of teaching, teachers should be given opportunities to grow professionally.

Darling-Hammond [5] suggests that the surest way to improved instruction is a formal system of teachers helping teachers. She states that "Every recent evaluation of the growing number of mentor teacher programs underscores the usefulness of having teachers help other teachers." (p. 5). She is echoed by Futrell [6] who suggests that effective instruction requires

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systematic school-wide programs in which all teachers help all teachers.

The issue of teacher development has been addressed to a limited degree in Turkish education literature. Up to now, the focus was more on the pre-service training of teachers, with little emphasis on in-service training. Whenever there has been a complaint about the quality of education, remedies have been directed toward the educational programs at teacher colleges.

However, the questions of how much access teachers have to in-service training and how useful those activities are for them in practice have not been addressed adequately. These questions usually were answered by administrators at the top of the hierarchy in the centralized educational system, but teachers' perceptions of the issue usually were not investigated.

Researchers, administrators from the Ministry of National Education, and educators from universities and other institutions have emphasized the need for and significance of teacher development [7; 8]. However, what needs to be done is usually not clear because teachers' opinions and needs are not described well. The recent Turkish literature on teacher education has dealt with the inadequacies in the preparation of teachers in the teachers' colleges. However, little attention has been devoted to teachers' professional development while they are in a teaching/learning setting. Teachers have not been asked about their needs, problems, and concerns. Moreover, teachers' perceptions of their professional development opportunities, and whether they are aware of the sources they have in their own schools are not known. Therefore, this study investigates teachers' perceptions of teacher development practices in Turkey while trying to answer the above questions, and finding out more about teachers' perceptions of their own professional development.

## 2. METHOD

A survey was used to collect data on teachers' perceptions of professional development opportunities, activities in which they are involved, their comments and recommendations.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section of the questionnaire included questions to retrieve demographic information about participants, such as the type of the school in which they work, their gender, their educational background, experience in teaching, the number of years of teaching in the current school, and the grades taught. The information received through the questions in this section were used in the analysis of differences in the perceptions of teachers in regard to each research questions.

The questions in the second section addressed teachers' perceptions of the existence of professional development opportunities. Availability of in-service activities and usefulness of those staff development opportunities were explored.

### 2.1 Population and Sample Selection

The population of this study includes all public elementary school teachers in the province of Ankara, Turkey. A representative sample of 500 subjects from 52 schools was selected. The selection of the sample was done systematically from two alphabetized lists provided by the City Board of Education. The two lists, one for the city schools, and one for the village schools, included all the elementary schools in the Ankara province. Equal representation in terms of gender, educational background, experience in teaching could not be guaranteed because the selection was done manually and the lists did not have the information on these characteristics for teachers.

According to State Institute of Statistics [9], there were 1,113 elementary schools in Ankara

province in the 1992-1993 school year; 307 were city schools and 806 were village schools. The questionnaire was sent to a sample of 400 teachers from city schools, and 100 teachers from village schools in order to have a representative group of primary school teachers in the Ankara province (i.e., a stratified sampling procedure based on school type was used). Since the return rate for village schools was expected to be much more lower than the rate for city schools, the proportion was decided accordingly.

Based on the lists provided by the City Board of Education, schools were selected randomly by picking every tenth school from each alphabetized list (i.e. a systematic sampling procedure was used). Since a computerized selection was not possible, the selection was done manually. The lists included how many teachers worked at each school; by adding up the number of teachers working at each selected school, the researcher stopped the selection process when 400 teachers were reached in city schools and 100 teachers were reached in village schools. In schools where there were split sections, only one section was selected. As a result of this selection process, 22 city schools and 30 village schools were chosen. Then, some of the survey questionnaires were mailed and some distributed in person to five hundred teachers in those schools.

## **2.2 Data Collection**

The questionnaires were mailed/distributed to teachers in the sample selected after the permission to administer the survey in the schools in Ankara province was obtained from the Ministry of National Education. In the selected schools, all teachers were given the questionnaire. In the city schools, the researcher's assistants distributed the survey questionnaires to the teachers in person with the permission from the school administrators. The teachers were told that the surveys would be

collected the following week. The research assistants visited each city school twice after they distributed the questionnaires. On their first visit, the assistants collected the completed questionnaires, and reminded the teachers who had not completed the surveys, or could not locate it at that time to have them ready by their next visit. The follow-up procedures in village schools were done by sending teachers reminder postcards six weeks after the questionnaires were mailed. The reminder postcards were not sent to those who identified their names or schools on the survey questionnaires received by that date. However, all 43 surveys received from the village school teachers had already come before the reminder postcards were sent; no more surveys were received from village schools after the reminder postcards were mailed out.

## **2.3 Data Analysis Procedures**

The data collected through the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. All responses to close-ended items were entered for computer analysis. Statistical analysis of the data was done according to the research questions. First, frequency distributions and percentages for each item were reported. The questionnaire was also analyzed in terms of the relationships between different variables, such as school type and size, gender, educational background, experience in teaching, and grade level teaching, and teachers' perceptions of professional development opportunities.

## **2.4 Demographic Characteristics of the Sample**

A total of 322 questionnaires were returned/collected. Since 9 of the returned surveys had too many unanswered questions/statements, these surveys were not used in the analyses. The 313 usable questionnaires provided a 64 percent return rate.

The return rate from city schools was 69 percent, and from village schools 43 %. Eighty-six percent of the study participants were from urban schools and about 14 percent from rural schools. These numbers match with the percentages of all urban and rural school teachers in primary schools in Ankara province, which were 88 percent and 12 percent respectively. That is, a representative sample was obtained. While 61 percent of the respondents were female, 39 percent were male. These percentages also match with the percentages of all female and male teachers in primary schools in Ankara province, 62 percent and 37 percent respectively.

### 3. RESULTS

The findings of this study are presented in two sections. First, teachers' perceptions of availability of current in-service activities that exist in the Turkish elementary schools were explored, then usefulness of those in-service activities were discussed.

Nine questions in the survey questionnaire were designed to find out teachers' perceptions of availability of in-service activities, whether they have participated in any of those activities, and whether they found them useful.

As Table 1 displays, 69 percent of teachers participated in in-service activities organized by the Ministry of National Education (MONE hereafter). A majority of those teachers participated in in-service activities by the MONE only once (36 %) or twice (38 %).

Table 1 also shows that 56 percent of teachers participated in in-service activities organized by the City Board of Education (BOE hereafter). Almost half of those teachers (47 %) participated in an activity only once, and 38 percent of them participated only twice. Most of the teachers participated in this study have had only 2 or 3 workshops from either source and they felt that there were not enough in-service activities.

The number of respondents who had never participated in any in-service activities offered by either MONE or BOE was 61 (20 %). Most of these participants (87 %) had worked in rural schools, and about one-third of these 61 respondents (28 %) had never worked in urban schools. Thus, it can be said that the reason why these respondents had never participated in any in-service training activities might be because in-service training activities are not widely available in rural areas. Hence the persons most likely to need support and service may not be getting it.

Similarly, the percentages of participants who had attended workshops offered by both MONE and BOE show that while 122 respondents (45 %) from urban schools attended in-service training activities offered by both sources, only 11 respondents (26 %) from rural schools had done so.

In addition, of the 122 respondents who participated in workshops offered by both MONE and BOE, only 5 respondents had experience "only in rural schools". These numbers might also indicate that rural school teachers are less fortunate in having access to in-service training activities.

Most of the teachers (81 %) somewhat to strongly agreed with the statement that in-service activities which they had attended were useful in improving their teaching skills, knowledge, and in solving difficulties they had in the classroom (see Table 2). Teachers also somewhat to strongly agreed (60 %) that new ideas presented during in-service activities were discussed afterwards by teachers in their schools. However, many teachers also believe (54 %) that there are not enough in-service activities/opportunities available for them. Most teachers (64 %) further added that teachers cannot attend as many workshops, seminars, or courses as they would like because they have to apply for and be selected by the organizers who happen to be administrators at MONE or BOE. As these responses show, although teachers find

**Table 1.** Distribution of Responses to Questions on Attendance to In-service Activities Organized by the Ministry of National Education and by the City Board of Education

| Questions on Participation to In-service Activities   |         | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---------|-----------|---------|
| Have you ever participated in any in-service training activities organized by the Ministry of National Education (workshop, course etc.)? | Yes     | 213       | 69.2    |
|   | No      | 95        | 30.8    |
|   |         | N = 308   | 100.0   |
| If the answer is "Yes", how many times have you participated?   | 1       | 69        | 35.9    |
|   | 2       | 74        | 38.5    |
|   | 3       | 28        | 14.6    |
|   | 4       | 13        | 6.8     |
|   | 5 +     | 8         | 4.2     |
|   | N = 192 | 100.0     |         |
| Have you ever participated in any in-service training activities organized by the City Board of Education (workshop, course etc.)?        | Yes     | 166       | 56.5    |
|   | No      | 128       | 43.5    |
|   |         | N = 294   | 100.0   |
| If the answer is "Yes", how many times have you participated?   | 1       | 68        | 47.2    |
|   | 2       | 55        | 38.2    |
|   | 3       | 15        | 1.4     |
|   | 4 +     | 6         | 4.2     |
|   |         | N = 144   | 100.0   |
| Number of respondents who attended no workshops offered by either MONE or BOE   | N = 313 | 61        | 19.5    |
| Urban School Teachers   | N = 270 | 44        | 16.3    |
| Rural School Teachers   | N = 43  | 17        | 39.5    |
| Experience in Rural Schools   | N = 61  | 53        | 86.9    |
| Experience Only in Rural Schools  | N = 61  | 17        | 27.8    |
| Number of respondents who attended workshops offered by both MONE and BOE   | N = 313 | 133       | 42.5    |
| Urban School Teachers   | N = 270 | 122       | 45.2    |
| Rural School Teachers   | N = 43  | 11        | 25.6    |
| Experience Only in Rural Schools  | N = 133 | 5         | 3.7     |

in-service activities useful, they are not widely available to all teachers.

As indicated in Table 2, most of the teachers believe that participating in in-service activities helps teachers to get together and share their experiences (86.2 %), and provides them with opportunities to improve their teaching knowledge and skills (93 %). They also believe that participating in in-service activities would be more helpful in their teaching than teaching experience itself (65 %). However, as mentioned earlier, most teachers have had only 2 or 3 workshops from any source.

When all the demographic variables were

cross-tabulated against the participants' responses to the two questions on participation in in-service activities, it was found that urban and rural school teachers differ significantly in their responses. While only half of the rural school teachers had ever participated in in-service training activities organized by the MONE, and only 35 % of them participated in activities organized by the BOE, most of the urban school teachers (72 %, and 60 % respectively) had participated in these programs. The reason why rural school teachers had participated in in-service training activities less than urban school teachers might be because, as mentioned earlier, these in-service training

**Table 2.** Distribution of Responses to Survey Questions on Availability and Usefulness of In-service Activities

| Statements About Availability and Usefulness of In-service Activities   | Frequencies and Percentages |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|---|-----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|   | DK*                         | SD*  | D*   | SWA* | A*   | SA*  |      |
| 1- In-service training activities which I have attended were very useful in improving my teaching skills/knowledge, and in solving the difficulties that I had in the classroom.  | N=212                       | 5    | 8    | 27   | 91   | 54   | 27   |
|   | %                           | 2.4  | 3.8  | 12.7 | 42.9 | 25.5 | 12.7 |
| 2- New ideas presented at in-service activities are discussed afterwards by teachers in my school.  | N=215                       | 11   | 20   | 54   | 66   | 50   | 14   |
|   | %                           | 5.1  | 9.3  | 25.1 | 30.7 | 23.3 | 6.5  |
| 3- There are enough in-service activities/opportunities available for teachers in our district.   | N=295                       | 32   | 58   | 102  | 60   | 38   | 5    |
|   | %                           | 10.8 | 19.7 | 34.6 | 20.3 | 12.9 | 1.7  |
| 4- Teachers in my district cannot attend any workshops, seminars or courses (offered either by the City Board of Education or Ministry of National Education) as they would like to because they have to apply for and be selected by the organizers. | N=292                       | 42   | 11   | 53   | 39   | 99   | 48   |
|   | %                           | 14.4 | 3.8  | 18.2 | 13.4 | 33.9 | 16.4 |
| 5- In-service activities, such as workshops and seminars on various instructional subjects, help teachers to get together and share their experiences.  | N=297                       | 7    | 10   | 24   | 51   | 139  | 66   |
|   | %                           | 2.4  | 3.4  | 8.1  | 17.2 | 46.8 | 22.2 |
| 6- Teachers can get opportunities to improve their teaching knowledge and skills by participating in in-service activities.   | N=293                       | 4    | 5    | 12   | 48   | 141  | 83   |
|   | %                           | 1.4  | 1.7  | 4.1  | 16.4 | 48.1 | 28.3 |
| 7- In-service activities are not necessary; teaching experience helps teachers more.  | N=298                       | 12   | 79   | 115  | 51   | 26   | 15   |
|   | %                           | 4.0  | 26.5 | 38.6 | 17.1 | 8.7  | 5.0  |

\*Legend: DK : Don't Know  
SWA : Somewhat Agree

SD : Strongly Disagree  
A : Agree

D : Disagree  
SA : Strongly Agree

activities are not widely available in rural areas.

There is also a significant difference between urban and rural school teachers in terms of how many times they participated in in-service training activities by MONE. Urban school teachers participated in these programs many more times than rural school teachers did. Thus, not only did more urban school teachers than rural school teachers attend in-service training activities, but they attended more activities as well.

There was also a significant relationship found between the gender of the participants and whether they believe that in-service activities are necessary. More female teachers (39% vs. 21%) think that teaching experience is more important than in-service activities. This might be because female teachers are more open in

sharing their ideas, instructional problems and concerns with others.

Therefore, they might think that in-service activities, which are mostly conducted in short periods, do not give them many chances to be better teachers compared to teaching experience.

Another significant relationship was found between the educational background of the participants and their participation in in-service activities. Predominantly, more teachers with 'junior college and below' education than teachers with 'college and above' education attended in-service training activities organized by both MONE (72% vs. 46%) and BOE (61% vs. 28%).

The findings of this study suggest that some in-service training workshops are conducted just for the sake of formality. Some workshops are

offered after hours or during the weekends when teachers are tired. In addition, sometimes necessary accommodations are not provided for participants when the activities are held far from home. Administrators should, therefore, make provisions for teachers to be released even during the school hours when they could fully concentrate on the specific activity offered. Options should be explored with the administrative staff both in the school or in the BOE to determine suitable times for professional development program during the school day.

The findings of this study also show that teachers do not apply what they learn in in-service training activities in their classrooms. However, one of the primary reasons for teachers to participate in in-service training activities is to acquire the skills which will improve their educational effectiveness in the classroom. With this in mind, organizers of in-service training activities also need to follow-up teachers so that they are doing things differently in the classroom as a direct result of the training program.

#### **4. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

Responses to the study questionnaire by a sample of 313 public school teachers, which is a close representation of the population by gender and school type, indicate that most Turkish elementary school teachers have participated in in-service training activities only once or twice during their career. There was a strong relationship between the school type the participants worked in and their participation in in-service workshops or courses. Rural school teachers have been less fortunate in having access to in-service training activities than urban school teachers.

The survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed that teachers need opportunities to improve their teaching skills and knowledge, but they reported that they do not receive the professional help they need. They also agreed

that participating in in-service activities helps teachers to get together and share their experiences and provides them opportunities to improve their teaching knowledge and skills. However, they noted that they cannot participate in these activities as many times as they would like to because the in-service activities are not widely available in all areas and teachers have to apply for and be selected in order to be able to attend them. The respondents stated that more in-service training activities, seminars, professional meetings and conferences should be organized and those activities should be made available to all teachers.

#### **5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

One of the important findings of this study was that most teachers had participated in only two or three workshops offered by the MONE or BOE, and although most teachers found in-service activities useful, they reported that the in-service training activities are not widely available to all teachers.

The respondents showed significant differences in their perceptions of availability of in-service activities by the school type they work in. The survey results indicate that the majority of teachers who were able to participate in in-service training workshops were urban school teachers. Not only did fewer rural school teachers attend in-service training activities, but they also attended those activities less frequently. These findings clearly show that rural school teachers have been less fortunate in having access to in-service training activities since these activities are not widely available in rural areas.

Most teachers agreed that in-service activities which they have attended were useful in improving their teaching skills, knowledge, and in solving difficulties they had in their classrooms. Most teachers also believe that participating in in-service training activities would provide teachers with the opportunities to

share their experiences and problems with others and find common solutions to common problems and concerns.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This exploratory study represents an initial step in providing data in the Turkish context which can be used in planning, organizing, and offering professional development opportunities for elementary school teachers. Therefore, it is an important contribution to the efforts to improving quality in the Turkish educational system. As shown by research [1, 4, 10, 11], the quality of teaching in schools cannot be improved without improving the quality of teachers. Therefore, continual professional development of teachers is crucial in school improvement efforts. As stated earlier when teachers help teachers to increase their effectiveness, everyone wins, most of all, the students [12].

Overall, the results of the survey findings suggest that elementary school teachers in Turkey do not have either enough or sufficient access to in-service training activities. In addition, there are not many other opportunities for teachers' professional development. This is especially true for rural school teachers.

The responses of the teachers involved in the present study give rise to certain implications for decision makers in the central organization and for educational administrators regarding teachers' professional development. The findings which underscore the need for teacher development, may spur them to take measures to improve the current situation. The results of the survey findings indicate that teachers do need professional guidance to improve their teaching and they need organized ways to make use of the resources they have in their own hands.

The findings suggest that carefully planned and widely-offered in-service training activities are critical to ensure that teachers develop professionally. Therefore, future educational administrators should organize and offer a

variety of training activities that will support the professional growth of teachers. The data also implies that not only do teachers want the Ministry of National Education and Board of Education to offer more and more widely available professional development activities, but they want to be directly involved in the planning and delivery of those activities. The demographic differences suggest that MONE or BOE can not just offer one set of activities but they need to design a variety of activities that are tailored to the different needs of teachers; e.g., they might use a different approach for men vs. women, beginning vs. advanced, or rural vs. urban teachers.

It is possible to view the findings of the present study as an indication that teachers are unaware of the current trends in teachers' professional development, and that they are constricted in their perception of professional growth. Due to lack of research in the Turkish context in this area, it is hoped that the data obtained is used as a knowledge base in conducting future studies and in planning, organizing, and offering teacher development opportunities.

Given the rapidly changing nature of the school environment and recent emphasis on in-service training activities, it is further recommended that additional research studies be conducted to determine the teachers' professional needs, and to find out more about teachers' expectations from the Ministry of National Education in terms of the allocation of additional resources into the development of teaching and the improvement of the quality of education as a whole.

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