

Views of Turkish Primary School Teacher Candidates on Observation Field Trip to Combined Classes in Rural Settlements

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Abstract

The general purpose of this study is to evaluate the views of primary school teacher candidates who have been taking the “Teaching in Combined Classes” course and who went on a one-time observation field trip to primary schools on this observation. The study is a qualitative research in the survey model. Study group of the research is made up of teacher candidates who were primary education department seniors at Konya University Ahmet Keleşoğlu Faculty of Education during the spring semester of 2011-2012 academic year. 40 volunteer teacher candidates participated in the study. In the study, since the views of teacher candidates were taken in writing, “descriptive analysis” method which is a qualitative research technique is used for data analysis. In this research, the data are presented by taking the survey questions into account. Survey forms were numbered from 1 to 40. Direct quotations have been taken from teacher candidates’ statements to reflect the views of the teacher candidates. While taking quotations, the numbers assigned to teacher candidates were used. According to the data findings, the majority of the teacher candidates expressed that they would want to work in combined classes after the observation field trip. All of the teacher candidates stated that making an observation field trip to village schools with combined classes contributed to their professional development. Most of the teacher candidates expressed that observation field trips to combined classes should be two semesters.

Keywords: combined classes, primary school, teacher candidate, rural settlements

1. Introduction

A combined class teaching refers to teaching led by a single teacher instructing a student group made up of more than one grade (Köksal, 2005). A combined class can also be defined as a class where students of different ages come together (Erdem, 2008; Şahin, 2007). After taking the classroom numbers into account, sometimes five grades are combined and sometimes three or four grades are combined depending on student and teacher numbers (Çınar, 2004).

When examining the reasons behind creating combined classes in Turkey, it can be said that reasons such as universalizing primary school education in rural areas, people living in rural places desiring schools, natural landscape structure and climate conditions of Turkey, distance of settlements from each other and difficulty in transportation between these settlements, physical deficiency of school buildings and lack of teachers and students necessitate creating combined classes (Doğan, 2000).

Social, economic and geographical conditions of Turkey make the creation of combined classes necessary. Therefore, there are schools with combined classes in all cities of Turkey. Schools combine classes in many countries like nearly all of the EU countries, the US, Japan and Canada (Köksal, 2005).

In Turkey, 18.827 teachers have been working in and 349.202 students have been attending to the 11.348 schools where classes are combined according to Ministry of Education’s 2010 data (Yılmaz, 2011). Despite authorities stating that combined classes are transitory applications, it is not possible to talk about any tangible indication showing that this application will be terminated anytime soon (İzci, Duran & Taşar, 2010).

The very first work places of teacher candidates graduating from primary education departments are likely to be village schools with combined classes. Because of this reason, students studying at education faculties’ primary education departments should be well equipped with necessary information about combined classes (Bayar, 2009).

Although ‘teaching combined classes’ course is a theoretical course studied only two hours a week in the primary education program’s last year at education faculties, the first assignment of majority of graduated teacher candidates are made to villages or settlements smaller than villages. It is tremendously difficult for the primary school teacher candidates to develop their teaching knowledge and skills about this application within the framework of a theoretical course that they have been taking only two hours a week. Most of the feedbacks received from teachers who have graduated and started to work in combined classes indicate that they quite come up short on combined class applications and they have difficulty in overcoming these shortcomings (İzci, Duran & Taşar, 2010).

Starting from this point, in this study, senior students who have been taking the “Teaching in Combined Classes” course were provided with the opportunity of an observation field trip to schools with combined classes. They were able see these schools first hand. Later, these teacher candidates’ views on this observation field trip were evaluated.

2. Research Purpose

The general purpose of this study is to evaluate the views of primary school teacher candidates who have been taking the “Teaching in Combined Classes” course and who went on a one-time observation field trip to primary schools on this observation. Firstly, the teacher candidates observed the teaching in these schools. They received information from teachers working there about combined class teaching. They visited the village. They got information from the villagers about the village life. Afterwards, teacher candidates were asked about their views on this observation.

In line with the study purpose, answers to the following questions were sought in the interviews conducted with the teacher candidates:

- 1) After your observation field trip, would you like to teach in combined classes? Why
- 2) Did your observation visit to village schools with combined classes make any contribution to your professional development? Why? Please explain.
- 3) How long do you think this observation field trip should be for? Why?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Model

This study is a qualitative research in the survey model. It is possible to define qualitative research as “a research where qualitative data gathering methods like observation, interview and document analysis are employed and where a qualitative process followed to present the perceptions and events in their natural environment in a realistic and integrative manner” (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006: 39). Qualitative research is preferred understand experiences, feelings and opinions of people better (Ekiz, 2009: 29).

3.2 Study Group

Study group of the research is made up of teacher candidates who were primary education department seniors at Konya University Ahmet Keleşoğlu Faculty of Education during the spring semester of 2011-2012 academic year. 40 volunteer teacher candidates participated in the study. 28 of these teacher candidates (70%) were female and 12 of them (30%) were males.

3.3 Data Collection

A survey form with three open-ended questions was prepared by the researcher to collect the data of this study. The teacher candidate provided their answers in writing on the forms.

3.4 Data Analysis

In the study, since the views of teacher candidates were taken in writing, “descriptive analysis” method which is a qualitative research technique is used for data analysis. In descriptive analysis, collected data are summarized and interpreted according to the themes presented by the research questions. While the data can be organized according to the themes presented by the research questions, they can also be organized according to the questions and dimensions used during the interview and observation. In descriptive analysis, direct quotations are frequently given to reflect the views of people interviewed or observed in a striking manner. In this type of analysis, the purpose is to present the obtained findings to the reader in an arranged and interpreted way (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006, 224). In this research, the data are presented by taking the survey questions into account.

Survey forms were numbered from 1 to 40. Direct quotations have been taken from teacher candidates’

statements to reflect the views of the teacher candidates. While taking quotations, the numbers assigned to teacher candidates were used. For example, teacher candidate 3 was coded as (T.C.3) or teacher candidate was coded as (T.C.22).

4. Findings

4.1 Findings about Teacher Candidates' Desire to Teach in Combined Classes

In the study, the teacher candidates were first asked "After your observation field trip, would you like to teach in combined classes? Why?" The majority of the teacher candidates responded to this question by saying, "yes, I would" (n=25). Some of them have responded by saying "no, I would not" (n=15).

Those who answered "yes" mentioned the following reasons for the question of why. "Class atmosphere is more friendly" (n=11). "The number of students are fewer" (n=5). "Liking the teaching profession" (n=5). "Thinking that it would be good vocational experience" (n=2). "Thinking that it is a more beneficial application compared to single-grade classes" (n=1). "Thinking that people in villages need education as well" (n=1). The following statements of teacher candidates can be given as example for these views:

"Yes, I would. I found the village kids and class atmosphere more sincere and intimate. Even if it is more difficult, I think it would be good to be in such a class." (T.C.13)

"I want to work as a teacher. I believe I can be more instrumental because I can be more productive with fewer students" (T.C.9)

"Yes, I would because I am someone who really wants to work as a teacher. The students going to village schools with combined classes need care and teachers. I think I can provide them with the required care and knowledge" (T.C.7)

Those who said "No" showed the following reasons to the question of why: "Lack of experience in this subject" (n=6). "Being new in the profession" (n=4). Being a difficult and exhaustive application" (n=5). The following statements of teacher candidates can be given as example for these views:

"I don't want to work as combined class teacher in the first years of my teaching career. I don't have enough experience in this subject. It is an exhaustive application that requires specialty."(T.C.16)

"I would not want because it is not an easy task. I might have hard time in teaching in combined classes especially in the first years of my profession since I will be inexperienced" (T.C.25)

"No, I would not want because I don't think I will be beneficial for my students" (T.C.2)

4.2 Findings about Contribution of Making an Observation Field Trip to Village Schools with Combined Classes to Professional Development

In the study, as a second question "Did your observation visit to village schools with combined classes make any contribution to your professional development? Why?" was asked. All of the teacher candidates (n=40) have answered saying, "yes, it has" to this question.

Those who answered "yes" mentioned the following reasons for the question of why. "Because the best way of learning is learning by living in natural environment" (n=19). "It was beneficial to see the differences between theory and practice" (n=18) "It was beneficial to see the village life" (n=3). The following statements of teacher candidates can be given as example for these views:

"Professional contribution of this observation field trip is undeniable. Because the best way of learning is by doing and experiencing, seeing the circumstances in its own place was useful. Seeing the real environment there and formalizing the concepts are very important to understand combined class teaching better."(T.C.4)

"I think that it was useful to see the differences between theory and practice. We received information from teachers teaching at combined classes for years and also saw the application right at its own place"(T.C.11)

"It was definitely useful. First of all, we saw the village life. We had an opinion about village life. Having seen the hard conditions, it helped us think that we should prepare ourselves for these conditions."(T.C.27)

4.3 Findings about How Long the Observation Field Trip to Combined Classes should be for

In the study, as a third question "How long do you think this observation field trip should be for? Why?" was

asked. Majority of candidate teachers said two semesters (n=23); some of them said one semester (n=10); some of them (n=3) said 3-4 weeks because it was difficult to go to villages; and some (n=4) said they did not have any opinion about the duration. The following statements of teacher candidates can be given as example for these views:

“This application is one of the most important parts of our profession. Therefore, making this exercise for one year could be much more productive. It can be good opportunity for us to observe the path students take from the beginning of the year to the end.” (T.C.29)

“Because this education system is an unavoidable reality, I think that this exercise should be continued for at least one year.” (T.C.5)

“In order to gain more experience, this exercise should be made at least for one semester, in other words 3-4 months. We should even teach as well.” (T.C.32)

“If the observation spans to three or four weeks, I think that conditions and situation there can be better understood” (T.C.36)

“I cannot comment on the duration but it should be more than one observation” (T.C.33)

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The majority of the teacher candidates (n=25) expressed that they would want to work in combined classes after the observation field trip. This research result is supported by the results of Bayar (2009)'s research. According to findings of Bayar's study, the teacher candidates did not want to teach at a combined class and were prejudiced against combined classes before taking the “Teacher in Combined Classes” course. However, after taking the course their perspectives on this subjects changed, their prejudices disappeared and they began to believe that combined classes would have many advantages when effective teaching is provided. Additionally, teacher candidates stated that village schools with combined classes that they have observed for the course have positively changed their attitude towards combined classes and they aroused willingness to work in combined classes. Majority of those candidate teachers who gave a negative answer and said they would not want to work as teachers in these combined classes mentioned not having enough experience as the reason. This view is supported by the study findings of İzci, Duran and Taşar (2010) and Kılıç and Abay (2009) and Şahin (2003).

All of the teacher candidates stated that making an observation field trip to village schools with combined classes contributed to their professional development. Therefore, the teacher candidates should be given the opportunity to observe and student teach in schools with combined classes before they graduate from education faculties. This point is also supported by the research results of Kılıç and Abay (2009), Şahin (2003), Bayar (2009), and İzci, Duran and Taşar (2010). However, at this present time the teacher candidates take the “Teaching in Combined Classes” courses in education faculties only theoretically and they do not student teach in combined classes. According to the research findings, the teacher candidates should student teach in addition to theatrical courses.

Most of the teacher candidates expressed that observation field trips to combined classes should be two semesters. Based on this result, courses taken at theoretical level cannot provide enough teaching experience to the teacher candidates. The teacher candidates are also aware of this situation. Research done by Bayar (2009), Şahin(2003), İzci, Duran and Taşar (2010) and Kılıç and Abay (2009) also support this situation.

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