Chapter 8

THE BRIDGE BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Practicum courses at the senior year of the preschool teacher training programs are essential to transfer theoretical knowledge into practice. Although the theoretical part of the preschool teacher training program applied in every education faculty in Turkey is mostly standard and prepared by the Higher Educational Council, there are differences related with the school characteristics, classroom teacher and the course advisor's expectations from the teacher candidates. In this study, daily activity plans prepared by the senior students of the preschool teacher education program from five different universities located in Ankara are analyzed by content analysis in terms of variables such as selected outcomes, activity types, materials, group activities, developmental areas focused and assessment methods. These variables not only show the instructional planning skills of the teacher candidates but also their teaching philosophy, creativity, interdisciplinary transfer and child care philosophy. It is expected that, by finding out these areas to be strengthened, both the theoretical and the practical dimensions of the teacher education will be improved.

Keywords: preschool teacher education, practicum, daily activity plans, teacher candidates.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that learning to teach is highly complex. This complexity is mostly about the integration between the different kinds of knowledge, university coursework and practice teaching is a common criticism of teacher education (Sim, 2006; Wilson, 2006). Therefore, following the idea of teachers learn by teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), teacher preparation programs embed field experiences and practicum courses within their programs. The main intention of these courses are to serve as a bridge between theory and practice of teacher education, which enables the teacher candidates transfer knowledge and skills gained in theoretical courses to the actual settings (Bell & Robinson, 2004). These practicum courses are also opportunities to reflect on the understanding of teaching as a profession and improve the teaching skills of the teacher candidates (Giebelhaus & Bowman, 2002), because without a cohesive preparation that connects content knowledge and practicum experiences, candidates fail to see the whole picture of the teaching profession.

However, teacher education nowadays has been segmented in theory and pedagogy taught in isolated intervals and too far removed from clinical practice (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2010). But teaching, like medicine, is a profession of practice, and teacher candidates must be prepared to become expert practitioners who know how to use the knowledge of their profession and how to build their professional knowledge through practice. In order to achieve this, practice must be put at the center of teaching preparation. It is not enough to read about teaching or to observe others teach, candidates have to practice themselves because practical knowledge is held by the individual and cannot easily be transmitted from person to person (Penglington, 2008).

Therefore, the main objective of the practicum is to provide teacher candidates' hands-on experiences in teaching, which is needed to develop their teaching skills and to start collecting experiences to enrich their professional wisdom (Ulvik and Smith, 2011). Professional wisdom of teaching refers to lots of characteristics, but in this case major ones are being purposeful and reflective that mostly occur in the decision making phase of teaching. Within the decision making process of the preschool teachers, determining the curriculum content, material and resource selection, planning the activities, managing children's behavior, assessing and evaluating the children's learning and development are included (Kilderry, 2012).

Decision making can be observed in many aspects of teaching, before or after the implementation, or in the actual setting. Planning that occurs before entering the class is the first step of decision making to an effective teaching, although it is not a guarantee for a good implementation. Especially for the teacher candidates and novice teachers planning before the action plays a great importance since it requires thinking about everything in both theory and practice. When teachers or candidates know what they need to accomplish and how they are going to do it, they have a better opportunity to achieve success. Moreover, plans of a teacher or a candidate can be seen as a reflection of their understandings of the curriculum, educational philosophy, content knowledge, pedagogical approach and teachers' role (Kilderry, 2012). Thus, analyzing the daily activity plans of preschool teacher candidates serves as a tool to understand their theoretical understandings of the academic content given at the university before they begin their career. From this point of view, the aim of this study is to improve the practicum of the preschool teacher candidates by analyzing their daily activity plans in terms of the pedagogical approach, being child centered, teaching strategies, preparing materials, learning environment and using the appropriate assessment techniques to promote children's development and learning.

2. BACKGROUND

Because teaching is a profession of practice and there is unique characteristics of early childhood education, preschool teacher education must focus on preparing expert practitioners who know the child, their subject-area content, and pedagogy in much the way that a family doctor must master the knowledge base of medicine as well as be able to understand patients and their symptoms to deliver a treatment for a best possible outcomes (NCATE, 2010). The skills and knowledge that beginning teachers should demonstrate in order to receive an initial license is already set on the program profiles. The point is how to transfer these well-written standards into practice (Holm & Horn, 2003), since achieving these requirements needs permanent processes of monitoring and assessment.

In order to improve the quality of the practicum of the teacher education faculties all over the country, teaching practice has been standardized during the 1997 education reform within the "Developing the National Education" project (1994-1998) which was carried out by Higher Education Council and the World Bank in Turkey. As a result of the project, certain rules and principles were determined and published in Faculty-School Cooperation Booklet, which has been then used in all education faculties. As part of this renovation, the duration of the teaching practice was extended to seventh and eight semesters and the content was clearly defined for the first time (Topkaya & Yalın, 2006). During the first semester trainees are required to practice at schools for four hours a week within the content of the 'school experience' course. During the second term, the trainees take the teaching practice course and visit schools for six hours a week. However, the application of

the teaching practice tends to differ in various education faculties, different departments of the same faculty, and sometimes even different supervisors within the same department.

In the practicum process, there are requirements that must be accomplished by the practicum course instructor, the school teacher and the teacher candidate. The effectiveness depends on the success of planning, implementing and evaluating as a whole (Ünver, 2003). Besides these, there should be a monitoring system followed by the staff from the faculty. Moreover, it would be more beneficial if the teacher candidate is capable of evaluating herself by reflective thinking. This kind of reflective evaluation will help the candidate to learn and practice self- awareness of her performance at the practice school and increase her self- efficacy for her future career (Shoffner, 2008).

Reflective evaluation requires the awareness of the performance or at least a brief self-assessment. Teacher candidates' ways of knowing about their performance acts as a lens through which they view the world and more specifically their approaches to learning and teaching. Thus, irrespective of how one might objectively describe a learning environment a student will be predisposed to see a situation in a particular way. The key intellectual and personal changes undergone by teacher education students as they progress through higher education and enter into employment varies since their capacity to reflect and to exercise decision making varies (Lucas & Tan, 2009). As mentioned before, first step of decision making for a teacher candidate is planning.

Learning within higher education expects that teacher candidates develop a capacity for reflection, which is needed for the improving their professional knowledge and practice. Related with this perspective, making activity plans for a teacher candidate and getting feedback from the practicum course instructor on their plans is the first step of this reflection. Putting all the background knowledge into practice begins with making plans for implementation. Moreover, there is another point to be mentioned about this study is the early childhood education program was updated in 2013 in Turkey. After this revising study, the updated program which is going to be implemented by the preschool teachers was meant to be introduced to both the in-service teachers and the teacher candidates. The updated points of the program were introduced by the instructors to the teacher candidates. In order to observe and check if the introduced characteristics and the approach of the new program was understood by the candidates, the lesson plans or the daily activity plans were taken as the first monitoring tool by the practicum course instructors at the faculty.

Some of the main characteristics and the approach of the revised program were as follows, being developmentally appropriate, child-centered, play based, supports creativity, balance with the big group, small group and individual activities, flexibility and discovery learning. These characteristics were meant to be observed in the daily activity plans of the candidates that reflect their understanding of the approach and the characteristics introduced in the theoretical courses. Besides, seeing the areas to be improved will help both the teacher candidates and their course instructors as a feedback for their performance about their teaching and learning.

3. METHOD

For the purpose mentioned above, thirty daily plans were analyzed through content analysis. Content analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique. Rather than being a single method, current applications of content analysis show three distinct approaches: conventional, directed, or summative. All three approaches are used to interpret meaning from the content of text data and hence, adhere to the naturalistic paradigm (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). They require similar analytical process including, selecting the

sample to be analyzed, observation, defining the categories to be applied during the analyses of the data, outlining the cods derived from the data process and reaching the themes or patterns (Kaid, 1989). But other than the other two approaches, in conventional content analysis, categories are derived from data during data analysis. The researcher is usually able to gain a richer understanding of a phenomenon with this approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

From this perspective, the daily plans which were taken as the data source of this study that collected from five different preschool teacher education programs located in Ankara, Turkey. Six plans from each program making thirty plans at the total were gathered via email. Each activity plan was covering a full day schedule at preschool education level. Practicum course instructors were asked to send at least twelve plans prepared by their current practicum class students and six daily plans from each program were selected randomly by the researchers for the data source. They were analyzed according to the purpose of the study and the characteristics of the revised early childhood education program explained in the background part of this chapter. The researchers were professors in the preschool teacher education program and experienced in qualitative analysis. In order to gain the trustworthiness, they coded all the data separately first and reviewed their analysis together in order to reach interrater agreement (Patton, 2002). After agreeing on the codes and their reference points, similar codes were gathered under subthemes and themes accordingly. Depending on the relationships between the codes researchers combined the subcategories into meaningful themes (Patton, 2002). Although none of the themes were predetermined before the data analyses, they were highly consistent with the analyses of the two researchers. Emerged themes were as follows:

Misunderstandings about being learner centered
Failing to support creativity and to design creative activities
Problems in concept teaching
Problems in balancing the small group, big group and individual activities
Issues about the assessment techniques

4. RESULTS

Results are categorized according to the five themes emerged from the data analysis and example quotations that refer to the related themes are given accordingly.

4.1. Misunderstandings about being learner centered

Activities are planned according to the expectations of the teacher and manipulated by the teachers to reach the expected or planned results. This situation yields us to think that being learner or children centered is misunderstood by the candidate. Following quotations are examples of these issues:

"Paint these glasses with these colorful sugar colors and draw flowers on them."
"Let us paint these fruits and vegetables according to their colors."
"When the music play, the ones in the circle will begin to dance."

4.2. Failing to support creativity and to design creative activities

Activities planned by the teacher candidates were far from developing or supporting creativity for children. Using different kind of materials in the activities to promote creativity was also ignored. Playing popcorn to pick up the toys, drawing pictures after story time, cut and paste activities for the art lessons show us that teacher candidates did not prefer different teaching methods in their daily plans. Using one type of material for the

similar activities indicates that they ignore the program characteristics of promoting or supporting creativity in children. Besides, the questions asked by the teacher candidates yield the children to give one type of right answer, which also is an obstacle for the creativity.

"We are going to make snakes with these newspapers, now make groups two by two…"

"Where do we get inoculated in order not to get sick?"

"Which play did we play?"

4.3. Problems in concept teaching

It is realized that there were misconceptions about the sense concept such as weight, smell, taste. They expect the children learn these concepts by looking at the pictures of the objects without any interaction with the actual object.

"Bring food and refreshment photos and classify them according to their tastes"

"Mark the hard object in the picture"

4.4. Problems in balancing the small group, big group and individual activities

It is also realized that the teacher candidates prefer mostly the group activities than the individual activities. In addition they prefer the competition type of group activities in which the individual achievements are rewarded.

"Children are made to jump on their one feet and the one who jumps hıgher wins…"

"The play goes on till there is only one children left standing while the others are waiting at the corner…"

"Now let us find who will finish the worksheet first?"

4.5. Issues about the assessment techniques

Assessment and evaluation is one of the important dimensions for teaching and learning process, therefore takes a significant place in the daily plans. It not only helps the teacher candidate understand the degree of reaching the expected outcomes, but also to understand the development of the children. However, it is found to be the weakest part of the daily plans of the participants. They only assess if the instructions are done by the children properly not if the program or the teacher himself or herself was successful are evaluated.

"Some of the children had difficulties at making the initial sounds of the alphabet."

"Some of the children needed help to complete the emergent literacy worksheets."

"The teacher had difficulties in teaching the … song because of the lack of attention of some children."

"Children had fun and spent good time."

Moreover, the teacher candidates are found to have issues on asking the right type of assessment questions to the children. The assessment methods were far from providing the clues to understand the achievement of the children and to help the teacher candidate improve him or herself by the end of the day.

"Did you like this story?"

"Do you like the numbers?"

5. DISCUSSION

The early childhood education program is grounded in a theoretical basis and a commitment to developmentally appropriate practices. An understanding of developmentally appropriate practices guides teacher candidates in their decision making processes. Candidates are expected to know the principles of child development and appropriate expectations for the ages of the children with whom they interact. They must consider the strengths, needs, and interests of individual children and recognize the importance of understanding the social and cultural backgrounds of the children in order to create meaningful early childhood environments and learning experiences (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2007).

Those characteristics of the developmentally appropriate practices are also the essentials of the revised early childhood education program. Besides the other principles of the program mentioned in the previous paragraphs of this chapter, the emerged themes given in the result part, reflects the expected but not fairly met areas of the daily activity plans of the teacher candidates. In order to improve the practicum of the preschool teacher education programs, those five themes emerged are the priority areas to be achieved. Those five areas are; misunderstandings about being learner centered, failing to support creativity and to design creative activities, problems in concept teaching, problems in balancing the small group, big group and individual activities, and issues about the assessment techniques. Improving the practicum beginning with these areas needs also a mutual interaction between the teacher candidates and their practicum instructors, since these results serve as feedback for both of them.

Practicum provides an opportunity for candidates to identify their strengths and areas of need in collaboration with their advisor and university practicum instructor and chosen knowledge and skills on which to base practicum (Adams & Wolf, 2008). Therefore, they should have the opportunity to observe both the good examples in action and learn from their practice. In a recent research conducted by Tekmen (2012), one of the main issues about the practicum courses of the preschool teacher education program discussed was the miss-guidance of the mentoring teachers and not giving the desired attention to these practicum courses. Candidates were concerned about not having the chance of observing enough good examples before graduating and felt incompetent about their performance in their future teaching career. In order to overcome these concerns as it was mentioned in the same study, there should be more practicum hours and more efficient implications should be designed for these teacher education programs.

The quality of the preschool teacher education programs is a critical component in the education of young children (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000). Early childhood classrooms rated at higher levels of quality have teachers with higher levels of education, experience, and positive attitudes and knowledge about early childhood education (Saracho & Spodek, 2007). Preschool teachers' level of education also affects the quality of early childhood classrooms and predicts developmental outcomes for children (Adams & Wolf, 2008). Traditionally, completion of a degree program at accredited institutions of higher education was considered sufficient evidence that a graduate is prepared to be an effective teacher. Today the focus is on evidence of teacher candidates' knowledge and demonstrated competencies through experiences (Ramey & Ramey, 2006).

On the other hand, the concept of learning from our experiences is mostly based on the principles of reflective thinking (Atay, 2003; Chitpin, 2006; Larrivee, 2008). According to this view, individuals learn from their experiences by thinking of their actions systematically and effectively. In other words, experience does not provide learning by

itself alone. It needs to be processed to be useful for learning. What increases learning from the experience is the reflecting. Based on this approach, not only the activities practiced in the classroom, but also the reflection of these activities is essential for the learning process (Koç & Yıldız, 2012). Reflective thinking in teacher education can be performed by portfolios, keeping diaries, or video-recordings. Self-evaluation of the teacher candidates about their daily plans and activities can be considered as reflective thinking.

Therefore, research on professional performance of the teachers mostly focuses on self-efficacy and therefore with the help of self-evaluation tools that promote the reflective thinking. The impact of reflective thinking on increasing the teaching performance is also supported by the literature related to effective learning principles of Dewey, where he defined reflective thinking as thinking on any knowledge effectively, continuously and intensely (Köksal & Demirel, 2008). Thinking attentively on the experience or performance helps the teacher candidate to evaluate the learning process and reshape his or her performance.

In this study, the implication performance of the teacher candidates are evaluated through their activity plans. The evaluation focused on the characteristics of the reviewed preschool education program that mentioned in the background information of the study. The data analyzed showed that teacher candidates had misconceptions about the principle of being learning centered which they considered it as following the teacher centered activities. They should be well informed about developing learner-centered environments and activities that the children had opportunity to choose, decide and participate in planning and evaluating not only following the instructions given by the teacher. Therefore, teacher candidates should be monitored and get feedback by the practicum course instructors before, during and after their application of the daily plans.

Those five main themes emerged summarize the areas need to be supported and improved for better teaching skills of the teacher candidates who participated by giving their daily plans to the study. Other than the results given, having very rare parent involvement in daily plans and lack of science activities such as experiments were also other additional areas to be improved. Moreover, although the student centered activities are encouraged, practicum plans that are analyzed mostly include teacher centered activities. Teacher candidates were found insufficient about asking reflective questions both to the children and themselves. This reflection process can be named as the clinical aspect of teaching which the core of the profession is (NCATE, 2010).

In conclusion, prospective teachers must learn to address the problems of practice and meet the unpredictable learning needs of the children. They should also learn from practice, as well as to learn to practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Teacher education programs need not only to provide teachers access to more knowledge and but also help the prospective teachers to learn how to inquire into their work. Improving the clinical practice of teacher candidates holds great promise for sparking improvement in learning and achievement in the early years.

All young children must be nurtured in safe and caring environments that allow them to become healthy, alert and secure and be able to learn. The past decade has provided more evidence that good quality early childhood care and education, both in families and in more structured programs, have a positive impact on the survival, growth, development and learning potential of children (Smith, 2009 as cited in Ulvik & Smith, 2011). Such programs should be comprehensive, focusing on all of the child's needs and encompassing health, nutrition and hygiene as well as cognitive and psycho-social development. All children and adults must be given the opportunity to gain the knowledge and develop the

values, attitudes and skills that will enable them to develop their capacities to work, to participate fully in their society, to take control of their own lives and to continue learning.

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