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Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 2 (2010) 629–633

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WCES-2010

“Teaching is a female profession in the eyes of a beholder” or is it?

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Received October 7, 2009; revised December 16, 2009; accepted January 5, 2010

Abstract

The study examines whether there is a changing trend in reactions of families and society towards male teacher candidates, as economic tendencies have changed drastically in Turkey. Nineteen male and three female student teachers majoring in English language teaching were interviewed for this study. It has been found that most families had neutral views. Some did not initially want their children to choose teaching, but they were later content about the decision, as they realized that graduating from teaching departments offered more employment opportunities. The reactions of the peers also change depending on their own field.

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Keywords: Male students; foreign language teaching; career choices.

1. Introduction

The status of teaching as a profession has undergone various changes throughout the history of Turkey. In the past, anyone “who knew” was allowed to teach without considering their professional development, as a result, individuals with qualifications in different fields were appointed as teachers (Celikten, Sanal, & Yeni, 2005, p.209). Therefore, teaching was considered an alternative profession, as one could often hear people saying “my son/daughter can at least become a teacher if he/she cannot find a position in his/her field.” As Celikten et al. (2005) suggests “the door to teachers in Turkey has always been open to people from different groups of occupations, and teaching has come to be considered a profession that is easily attainable and can be practiced by anyone” (p. 210). Such practices have obviously reduced the status and the reputation of the teaching profession. The prestige of the profession was maintained until the 1970s; however, due to rapid social change and industrialization in later years, the profession started to lose its reputation (Celikten et al., 2005).

There is a significant relationship between the status of teachers and their salaries, social opportunities, and working conditions. When compared to some professions, teaching was quite behind in terms of status and reputation. However, under the project called “Reconstruction of the Faculties of Education”, completed in 1998 through the cooperation of MEB (Ministry of Education) and YOK (The Council of Higher Education), practices such as providing students who prefer teaching programs with scholarships have started to produce good results (Celikten et al., 2005). In recent years, teaching profession has gained momentum. An increasing number of successful students select teaching programs in their top five preferences and the scores for entering the programs

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have increased (Celikten et al., 2005). The most important reason teaching has gained popularity is that it is more likely for teacher graduates to enter working life and to become government employees which means a guaranteed future. The Career Coordinator of the Sınav Private Teaching Institution, Omer Ocal, confirms that there are no assured professions other than English and Turkish language teaching and medicine in Turkey and that interest in working in the private sector has decreased since everyone wants to work under the assurance of the State (Interest in medicine, 2009). Similarly, the Career Coordinator of Kultur Private Teaching Institution, Salim Unsal, argues that professions in the helping fields have gained popularity as the graduates of the mostly favored fields such as electric and electronic engineering and industrial engineering have not managed to find work in their fields in recent years and thus people have started to choose guaranteed jobs with which there are no employment problems (Interest in medicine, 2009). As well as the assurance of employment opportunities, another important motivator for selecting teaching profession is the moral satisfaction and aspiration to educate young people. For instance, Ariogul (2009b) who interviewed male student teachers in her study found that “the driving motivator for the participants was the strong determination and commitment to the profession and the anticipation of moral satisfaction as well as the desire to be effective role models for their students” (p. 5).

It can be said that becoming a teacher is no longer an easy task. However, this does not necessarily mean that teacher candidates or teachers of different genders have an equal status in the society when they choose teaching as a profession. Professions such as teaching and nursing are still considered female-dominated while professions that require physical strength, high intelligence, and long-hours of work such as engineering, law, and medicine are considered male-dominated (Vefikuluçay Yılmaz et al., 2009). The purpose of this study is to examine whether there is really a changing trend in reactions of the families and society towards male teacher candidates as economic tendencies have changed drastically in Turkey. This study also aims to give implications for recruiting more male students, thereby increasing diversity in this profession.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and research context

Nineteen male and three female student teachers majoring in English language teaching in a large research university in Turkey participated in this study. All of the participants were graduates of Anatolian Teacher Training High School and possessed advanced proficiency in English. This is a four-year high school designed to prepare teacher candidates for careers in Schools of Education in Turkey. The program in which they studied is in the top tier in the field of education.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

Almost an equal number of students were selected from every year level and were interviewed either separately or as a focus group. Each participant was informed about the research orally and in writing before the interview was conducted. Every selected student agreed to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted and audiotaped in a semi-structured style, considered most appropriate (Carspecken, 1996), lasting approximately thirty minutes. They were conducted in Turkish to put the participants at ease. The interviews were transcribed and coded for emerging themes and categories. Similar themes and categories were combined according to the research questions.

2.3. Research Questions

- 1- What are the attitudes of parents about male students' career choice?
- 2- What are some of the reactions of male students' peers towards their career choice?

3. Findings

3.1. Parents' attitudes in male student teachers' decision-making process

The reactions of the participants' families towards their sons' choice to enter the teaching profession are classified into four groups. The majority of the families had neutral opinions of the teaching profession (56%). Some parents had resisted the idea of choosing teaching as a profession initially but then changed their minds after their sons started at the university (21%). There was a small group of parents who had constantly resisted their son's career decision (10%). Lastly, 10% of the parents had positive attitudes to their son's career choice. As for the parents of female participants, they had positive reactions to their daughters' decision throughout the process.

During the interviews, most of the male student teachers commented on the lack of influence their parents had on them when they had to make a career decision in secondary school. Some tried to explain that situation, citing the lack of knowledge and experience their parents had about university and career life and did not consider it to have had a negative effect on their path.

"They did not say anything. I had friends whose fathers forced them to choose medicine, and then these people were depressed when they could not make it. My parents did not do that. I was always by myself even on the date of the exam" (A).

"My dad went to school for two years and my mom did not even have that. When I said that I had chosen English language teaching as a career path, my dad told me 'Alright son, do whatever you believe is the best'" (B).

"They never said anything. They were elementary school graduates. They cannot even say anything now. They always say 'Do what you feel is the best'" (C)

"I was in a boarding school starting from the 8th grade, and I always tried to stand on my own feet and make my own decisions. My parents were away. I remember seeing my parents for only three months in five years" (D).

However, some students expressed their regret for not having anyone close to them to provide career help when they were too young to make that decision.

"My parents did not provide any support in any way. I wish they could have done that. I was 15-16 years-old, and I did not know what to choose as a profession. I kept asking to my parents, and all they said was 'You know the best'" (C).

The second group of parents initially reacted negatively to their sons' decisions to become teachers, but some later recognized the importance of teaching as a profession.

"When I said that I was going to choose a language strand in high school to become an English teacher at the university, my parents immediately asked my reasons for not choosing a math or science strand. But I insisted on my decision...When I started studying English language teaching at the university, my mom said that she was glad that I did not listen to her suggestions" (E).

"My parents fiercely reacted to my choice since they thought that I would have more options to choose from in a math strand. I chose a language strand in high school. Now they are glad that I am in the English language teaching department at this university and told me recently that I made a good decision" (F).

For some male student teachers, the situation did not change much, as their parents still held on to the idea of choosing a field other than teaching.

"They were expecting something more than that [the teaching field]. They asked me why I did not choose earth sciences or engineering. I said I wanted to be an English teacher. Since I had been a successful student ever since I was a little boy, everybody expected something more than that" (G).

"I said to my dad that I am in a language program in high school, and he did not say anything, but I knew that he was expecting me to become a doctor. In my last year in high school, he asked me why I chose teaching instead. I tried to tell him the importance of being a teacher, but he just could not get it. That was the last talk we had" (B).

As stated in these quotations, some of the families did not want their children to choose teaching but wanted them to select medicine or engineering instead; however, they were later content with their children's decision, as they realized that graduating from a teaching department offered more employment opportunities. Among those families, there were also some who had positive reactions to their children's career choice, during and after the decision-making process; however, most of the families with positive opinions had daughters preferring teaching.

“My mom thought that teaching was an ideal profession for a girl like me. My dad said the same thing” (H).

“If there is an ideal job for women, it should be the teaching. My younger brother is studying mechanical engineering, and if he happened to have chosen teaching, he would not have gotten the positive reactions from my parents that I got” (I).

3.2. *The reactions of male students' peers to their career choice*

The reactions of male students' peers to their choice of teaching as a career path are divided into two groups. A group of peers, especially those studying in more challenging departments, such as medicine or engineering, thought that the male students who opted for teaching were making an easy choice.

“My peers from other departments think that we do not study as much as students in engineering or medical departments” (E).

“My male friends look down on my department. I am part of a debate group at the university, and there are students from the law school and international relations. When I say I am from the English language teaching program, they look down on me and ask what I could possibly know about the constitution, philosophy, and political management” (C).

“I had friends from the math strand in high school, and they asked whether I really wanted to be a teacher. If I happen to be a girl, they most likely would not ask that. There is this prejudice in society: Women get married to pharmacists or doctors. For us, it is nearly impossible to have a better life-style by getting married to a female doctor. They are kind of right. Whatever a female teacher brings as a salary is okay” (D).

A second group of peers thought that choosing English language teaching as a profession was a good thing for men to do.

“I never got any negative reactions. Everybody supported me. I come from a small village, and there are only a few people going to school, let alone studying at a university like High Valley. So when I say that I am at High Valley, they just freeze for a few seconds” (J)

“I get positive reactions from peers, but people's opinions are money oriented. The first thing they say is that ‘Good for you. You will get appointed immediately’” (K).

As understood from the quotations, positive reactions came from two different groups: from those who lived in rural areas and have not had the opportunity to go to university and from those who realized that being an English teacher is guaranteed profession in terms of finding a government job.

4. Conclusion

This study investigated whether there was really a changing trend in reactions of families and society towards male teacher candidates, as economic tendencies have changed drastically in Turkey. For that purpose, nineteen male and three female student teachers from an English language teaching program were interviewed. Examining the views of parents towards these participants brought four different opinions that developed from the same initial reaction. Most of the parents did not react, assuming that their sons were more knowledgeable than them and, therefore, able to make the right decisions. These parents were those with little educational background. A second group of parents had resisted the idea of their sons choosing teaching as a profession initially but then changed their minds when they realized that their sons were on the right track because teaching, especially English language teaching, was a good field to study and work in. However, there were also some parents who appeared not to change their minds even after the male students started their degree programs. The last group of parents had positive views about their sons' choices. Interestingly, the parents of the three female student teachers had always shown positive reactions to their daughters studying in the teaching department. Although the study had limited participants, the findings tell the authors that families of male students want to see their sons in professions that the society considers more challenging and status based. However, the girls studying in the same department were supported in their choice from the beginning of their decision-making process.

In the second part of the study, the authors examined the attitudes of peers toward the participants. Mixed reactions were observed. For instance, those peers studying in more popular departments such as law or politics underestimated male students in the teaching department, viewing teaching fields as lacking in depth and intellectual

stimulation. For some others, such as those living in rural areas or those who have been in a job market for some time, teaching was considered secure employment.

Finally, two interesting points have to be mentioned about this study. The first one is that there is really a changing view in the opinions of student teachers' parents towards their sons choosing teaching as a career. Although they reacted to their sons choice initially, wanting them to consider jobs that they felt were more appropriate for males, they soon realized that teaching, especially English language teaching, has become a popular field to work in due to its employment opportunities. However, when a similar study (Ariogul, 2009a) was conducted two years ago, the author observed patterns of resistance from parents and derogatory comments from peers about students selecting teaching more than those in the current study. The second interesting point in this study is the firm stance of male student teachers. Despite all the negative initial reactions that were received from parents and pressure from the peers around the participants to choose a 'more challenging and male-dominated profession,' almost all the participants had a strong, dedicated spirit and were determined to show the world that they were very happy to be English language teachers. This attitude appeared to be linked to the satisfaction they felt with their career choices and the maturity and knowledge they possessed regarding their abilities and limitations.

Considering the negative views of the peers who find the field of language teaching too simple, it can be suggested that the field needs to be introduced and presented accurately to other students so that it is not recognized as a field which deals only with the teaching of language. Furthermore, in order to help teacher candidates make healthy career choices and not being influenced by societal prejudices, the career counseling centers at teacher training high schools should be restructured and should avoid categorizing any teaching fields with a gender prejudice.

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