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Overseas teaching experience: student teachers' perspectives of teaching practicum

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Abstract

This study assesses the extent to which teaching experience in Turkish schools affected the educational philosophies and expectations of foreign and Turkish student teachers. Five foreign student teachers and 8 Turkish student teachers were examined for a 3 weeks teaching practicum in English lessons. The students participated to a pre-teaching survey consisting of 6 open-ended questions related to perceptions, expectations and attitudes towards language teaching. The students also kept a journal during their practicum program. The findings indicated that pre-teaching experience had an important impact on both foreign and Turkish student teachers' professional and personal development.

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Key words: Teaching practicum; international teaching experience; teaching philosophy.

1. Introduction

Overseas Student Teaching programs have taken considerable attention by the educators and by student teachers in various fields. For example, a survey conducted by Wilson (1984) shows that short-term international travel has a positive effect on elementary and secondary teachers. It improves their teaching about the places they visited, engenders responsibility for passing on the experience, and encourages them to try more cross-cultural encounters. Teachers with international experience know more and want to share that knowledge, are aware of and accept differences in peoples and cultures, and often act as cultural mediators (Wilson, 1985).

International teaching experience not only enhances student teachers' awareness of other cultures but also their professional and personal development. For example, Pence, & Macgillivray (2008) investigated 15 teacher education students from the US who completed a 4-week international practicum working in the classroom with teachers and students at a private international primary through secondary (K12) school in Rome, Italy. Data include preservice teachers' reflections and comments collected from their personal journals, focus groups with supervisors, observation notes, a final reflection paper, course evaluations, and a questionnaire completed 1 year after the experience to assess any lasting impact the trip may have had on them as individuals and future teachers. While

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there were a few negative experiences, the results indicate that overall the benefits included both professional and personal changes, such as increased confidence, an awareness of the importance that feedback and reflection play in professional and personal growth and a better appreciation and respect for differences of others and other cultures. Similarly, Willard (2001) investigated elementary preservice teachers' perceptions of a 1-week international teaching experience. Students traveled to Mexico to teach in a bilingual school and tour cultural and historical sites. The indicated lasting positive effects of this experience on participants' teaching and personal lives. According to Willard, the benefits of the program were gaining perceptual understanding of other people, having personal growth, getting substantial knowledge of other cultures, and making interpersonal connections.

The results of the above studies were obtained from various studies in which native student teachers of ELT were examined during their internship program in various overseas countries. Conversely, in a study conducted by Sahin (2008) 26 graduate non-native student teachers of ELT were examined during their two-month internship program in a mid western state in the USA. The results of this research also supported the fact that the international student teaching experience and the overall internship program with its cultural components contributed in a positive way to student teachers' professional and personal development and helped student teachers increase their cultural awareness.

In terms of research methods, the above studies had some features in common in the sense that the participants were all graduate student teachers attending an international/overseas teaching program in their institutions, and that no comparison was made between them and conventional student teachers in the same institutions. Mahan & Stachowski (1990) have filled this gap by conducting a study with a group of American student teachers enrolled to an Overseas Student Teaching Project offered by Indiana University- Bloomington. The researchers compared the learnings reported by novice teachers in conventional, stateside student teaching assignments and the learnings reported by students who did student teaching overseas. Overseas participants acquired more learnings than did their counterparts, exhibited broader perspectives in the content of their learnings, and acknowledged a greater variety of learning sources (Mahan & Stachowski 1990).

The present study will contribute to the related literature by comparing and showing the impact of the pre-teaching experience on both foreign and native student teachers' teaching philosophies and expectations.

1.1. Background

One of the private universities in Turkey commenced a student teacher exchange program with two American Universities. Based on the protocols signed by these universities five student teachers from these universities came to Turkey to get their field experience. They were accompanied by their faculty supervisors. The faculty supervisors of these student teachers contacted to the faculty member of the host university to coordinate with their students at the host schools. During the orientation program, the administrators of the schools, faculty members of both universities, foreign student teachers and student mentors in the schools had several meetings. The same procedure was used for the Turkish student teachers who were randomly selected from the ELT department of a private university to take part in this study.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Five foreign student teachers (3 females, 2 males) and eight (all females) Turkish student teachers consented to participate to this study. Their ages varied from 22 to 36. The student teachers in both groups were in the same subject area; English.

2.2. Instruments

I collected the data through two questionnaires (pre- and post-teaching) and journals. I adapted some of the items in the questionnaires from a study conducted by Hugh (1995). The rest of the items were created for this investigation. I designed the items in all these instruments in open-ended format. They were parallel to each other and

grouped under several categories such as reasons for choosing an overseas placement/reasons for choosing English as the major subject, usefulness of teaching practicum, expectations about educational system, necessity of pre-teaching experience, teaching philosophy, and self-concept (see Table 1 & Table 2).

Table 1. Categories and items of pre- & post-teaching questionnaires

PRE-TEACHING QUESTIONNAIRE	
<i>Categories</i>	<i>Items</i>
<i>Choices</i>	Why did you choose to do your teaching practicum in Turkiye?
<i>Expectations</i>	What expectations do you have about the Turkish Educational system?
<i>Necessity of practicum</i>	Do you believe that teaching practicum is necessary for teacher candidates?
<i>Usefulness of practicum</i>	Do you believe that teaching practicum will be useful to you when you start your real teaching?
<i>Teaching philosophy</i>	What's your teaching philosophy?
<i>Self-concept</i>	Do you believe that your will be good teacher?
POST-TEACHING QUESTIONNAIRE	
<i>Categories</i>	<i>Items</i>
<i>Expectations</i>	To what extent were your expectations accurate?
<i>Impressions</i>	What things impressed you most? Were there things that you disliked about your school?
<i>Supervision</i>	In what ways was your university supervision different from that you would have experienced in your country?
<i>Philosophy</i>	Has the practicum program affected your philosophy of education?
<i>Self-awareness</i>	How do you see yourself as a language teacher?
<i>Recommendation</i>	Would you recommend any changes for the teaching practicum program?

The journals consisted of 21 items representing three factors such as evaluation of teaching methods/styles, evaluation of students (their learning styles and difficulties, feelings) and evaluation of self-image.

2.3. Procedure

The student teachers were placed in four schools. These schools were private high schools and located in various parts of Istanbul. They were examined for a 3 weeks teaching practicum in English lessons. Both foreign and native student teachers worked with mentors in pairs. I collected the data in three phases. Firstly, I administered a pre-teaching questionnaire to the subjects before the practicum started. Secondly, the subjects kept journals during the 3 weeks practicum. And finally I distributed post-teaching questionnaires to the participants when they completed the program.

3. Analysis

I analyzed the data by using content analysis. I coded the participants' responses to interview and journals items to generate categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The organisation of the categories arised from previous studies (Hugh, 1995; Sahin, 2008). The results are presented in the sections as follows:

3.1. Choices

Both Turkish and foreign student teachers admitted that the reason for choosing English as the major subject was concerned with travel, adventure, and cultural exchange. Foreign students stated that the opportunity to travel to Turkiye was attracted them because of it's rich in history and culture.

3.2. Expectations

Although some of the foreign students expected the educational system in their country to be similar to the one in their country, others in this group expected to see more structured and disciplined schools. Turkish students had

similar expectations. The results of the post-teaching questionnaires showed that all students were accurate in their expectations about teaching methods, supervision and the teaching experience that they would get.

3.3. Necessity and usefulness of the practicum program

Students in both groups admitted that they benefitted from the pre-teaching experience in many ways. They believed that it raised their self-confidence, helped them to develop and shape teaching strategies and gain more insight about teaching. According to foreign students, the overseas teaching practice increased their cultural and world awareness and let them to set world citizenship.

3.4. Impressions

The things that impressed both native and non-native students were the teachers' professional attitudes toward their students and colleagues at schools. They found that these teachers were very friendly and patient to their students, and they had warm relationship and made a cooperative effort with their colleagues to raise the educational level of their students.

3.5. Teaching philosophy

The pre-teaching experience of the students strengthened their beliefs about the integration of different teaching methods, use of technology, authentic and modern materials in lessons. The program enhanced their awareness about the impact of culture, classroom management and discipline policy in teaching.

3.6. Supervision and recommendation

All subjects found supervisors and mentors at school very helpful, well-organised and encouraging. The participants appreciated supervisors' and mentors' supportive manners especially during the feedback sessions. Turkish student teachers recommended that the duration of the practicum should have been longer and intensive.

3.7. Beliefs about self-image

The pre-teaching program raised all students' awareness for their own weaknesses and strengths in teaching, their attitudes toward teaching as profession and their choices for different learner levels.

4. Conclusion

of the present study revealed that international teaching experience let preservice teachers gain lots of insight in teaching and global perspectives, and improve themselves more professionally and personally. Such programs are found to be very useful in constructing a bridge between mentor teachers and foreign student teachers and increased their intercultural understanding, geographical and historical knowledge (Sahin, 2008; Hugh, 1995). In fact it would be ideal to increase the amount of these programs and design them as an exchange program.

The preservice teaching program seems to be professionally important for Turkish student teachers as well. It enables them to get a clear picture of educational system, to analyse it and be well-prepared before the actual teaching starts.

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