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Beginning early childhood education teachers' problems in Turkey

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explain problems of beginning early childhood education teachers in Turkey and how could teacher education programs be improved in order to reduce these difficulties. The general complaints of a novice teacher, mostly, resulted from the discrepancy between the teacher training and the actual teaching experience. Another problem that beginning teachers might encounter originated from regional differences. In some parts, beginning teachers find themselves in a situation that they have to teach children who cannot speak Turkish. Finally, most of the provincial universities are struggling with lack of qualified academic staff.

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Keywords. Beginning teachers, reality shock, teacher education program

1. Introduction

The incentives initially motivating the beginning teachers are not sufficient to retain teachers in the teaching profession when they are left alone in a classroom. Beginning teachers suddenly realize that the reality of the classroom does not meet up to their expectations (Stokking, Leenders, Jong, & Tartwijk, 2003). Many beginning teachers report frustration, anxiety, stress, self-doubt, a sense of incompetence, classroom management problems, lack of support, pressure, low confidence, concerns and challenges since they have to deal with the teaching load and the other responsibilities at school (Achinstein, 2006; Huberman, 1992; Ingersoll, 2001; Stokking et al, 2003; Veenman, 1984). For this reason, most of the first-year teachers lose their idealism, ambition, enthusiasm, and they even decide to quit the teaching profession (Delgado, 1999). The transition from the teacher training period to the first teaching job can be a dramatic and traumatic process. This transition is often referred to as the 'reality shock', which addresses the collapse of the idealism formed during teacher training by the unkind and offensive reality of everyday classroom life (Veenman, 1984). Huberman (1992) called the first year of teaching a 'sink or swim' scenario. Both the notions of "reality shock" and "sink or swim" imply that the first year of teaching is immensely difficult for the beginning teachers.

The reason for the reality shock can be explained in three ways: extremely idealistic expectations, demanding working conditions, and insufficient preparation for the profession (Stokking et al, 2003). The unrealistic expectations of beginning teachers include those of gaining a friendly rapport with their students, getting the respect of their parents, and attracting the admiration of administrators and colleagues. Moreover, they are expected to create peaceful, comfortable and supportive classrooms and have endless energy to meet every demand in this

classroom. However, these unrealistic expectations cause frustration due to the imbalance between the teacher's expectations of teaching and the realization of the actual condition. Unfortunately chaotic classes, indifferent parental behavior, and highly critical assessments from administrators are definitely not what the teacher will have expected (McCann, 2001). Their positive expectations are diminished when they begin to struggle to meet the demands of the teaching profession, demands such as discipline problems, relations with parents, motivating students, meeting the diverse learning needs of students, insufficient teaching materials, and support. All these components result in a frustration in accomplishing a task, failure to maintain a teaching atmosphere in the classroom, and an inability to communicate with parents for the benefit of their children (Veenman, 1984).

1.2. Teacher Education Program and Beginning Teachers

Teacher education programs help to prepare teachers to understand what it means to be a teacher since students generally enter programs with an incomplete and unarticulated initial view of teaching (LePage, Nielsen, & Fearn, 2008). In order to prevent the frustration caused by insufficient preparation, there is a need for organizing a satisfactory relationship between theory and practice. The isolation of schools and the gap between theory and practice during teacher education is the main influence on beginning teachers. This is a conclusion of the general observation that beginning teachers are either not well-prepared for practical teaching or that they are insufficiently able to put their academic knowledge to use in their practical teaching. In this context, beginning teachers think that their professional knowledge and skills increase in their early years of service rather than in their teacher education program. (Maandag Denium, Hofman, & Buitink, 2007; San, 1999).

The ideal would be to educate teachers to become competent in class as well as capable of understanding what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how they might change their practice to better address the context or circumstances. However, there is a tension between the requirements and the focus of universities and schools. While the former focuses on understanding theory, the latter focuses on practice and performance. It seems that a university education does not meet the needs of schools since beginning teachers experience a difficult adjustment process while they leave the academic world and enter the real world of the teaching (Moffett, John, & Isken, 2002). In Turkey, it is assumed that the Education Faculties and the Ministry of Education work in harmony in order to prepare teachers to be strong in both theory and practice. However, these two institutions are not hand-in-hand and there appears to be a discrepancy in their strategies. Hence, beginning teachers experience a disparity between their gains from pre-service years and the school environment in which they will work as a formal teacher (Yalçınkaya, 2002).

2. Beginning Teachers' Problems in TURKEY

The majority of the problems that beginning teachers encounter are considered universal (Veenman, 1984). Additional problems due to cultural, regional, historical, and economical conditions emerge in the Turkish context, especially for early childhood education (ECE) teachers. Although there has been a recent emphasis on ECE in Turkey, the tradition of ECE is not extensive (Oktay, 1999). The biggest step in increasing schooling rate for ECE was taken in 2009 with the selection of 35 pilot districts by the Ministry of National Education (MONE). MONE hired 5356 teachers in 2009 which is more than the total in all the other departments of teachers (MONE, 2009). Although most of the candidate teachers are concerned with an uncertain future in their job, there is more chance for ECE teachers to work in public schools. Therefore candidate ECE teachers may feel more comfortable about job opportunities since they might more easily find a job after graduating university. Considering the fact that the unemployment rate in Turkey is 16% (TÜİK, 2009), this situation presents a great advantage for them.

The fact that beginning ECE teachers do not seem to have an employment problem, however, does not clearly address the actual problems they have when they start teaching. They have difficulties in their first year due to the substantial regional differences between the eastern and western parts of Turkey. Most of the children in eastern Turkey are bilingual whilst their mothers do not speak in Turkish. Therefore there is an increasing need for programs considering the target population's characteristics rather than a sole similar program for the general population in Turkey (AÇEV, 2002a). Preservice teachers' lack of awareness of school structures and environments also causes some problems (Küçükahmet, 2007). Except for independent preschools, most public preschool classes

are not built with consideration for the 3 to 6 years old children's needs, interest and development due to the fact that elementary classes are redesigned for preschool children. Therefore, beginning teachers start teaching in classes where both structural quality including space, lighting, safety, and materials and process quality including interaction, parent involvement and educational activities are poor. Communication between the teacher and children becomes authoritarian in these classrooms because of the overpopulation. This interaction style leads to passive student engagement in teacher-directed activities and limited peer interaction with the supervision of the teacher (Gol-Guven, 2009).

Beginning teachers also struggle to handle the enculturation process of teaching. Teaching is a demanding task which occurs in both a complex material and an ideological context. Beginning teachers are required to engage in this complex organization and physical environment successfully (Fotland, 2004). The adjustment process is labelled as 'learning the ropes' which simply means that new teachers are helped to fit into the existing system. The early years of teaching are a time of coping, adjustment, and survival, which is largely dependent on the working conditions and culture of school. If they are not sufficiently supported they may blame students, parents or administrators to ease their difficulties and feel some comfort (Nemser, 2003). While beginning teachers enter into school organizations another form of shock can emerge as a result of conflicts with colleagues, administrators and policies, since they often come to schools with little knowledge of organizations and the politics of school life. New teachers' beliefs and actions may clash with existing organizational norms. They face issues of power, interest and negotiation so they need to learn school contexts. They also should know how to read, navigate, and transform the organizational context in which they work (Achinstein, 2006).

Teacher education programs do not include any course explaining the structure of MONE and how it works, although MONE is the main employer of teachers. MONE governs approximately 60 thousand schools, 659 thousand teachers, and 14 million students (MONE, 2010). It offers plenty of opportunities for promotion and its legislation is quite complex to be understood. Therefore, there must be courses related to administration in the teacher education program in order to prepare beginning teachers for official correspondence, legislation, promotion opportunities, and to be aware of their rights (AÇEV, 2002b). Beginning teachers tend to develop a hesitation in communicating with their administrators because they do not know their personal rights. This excessive hesitation reduces the quality of the relationship between the school administration and the beginning teachers (Erdemir, 2007).

The quality of the university education offered to the ECE teachers is also questionable. Faculties of Education in Turkey have the highest student-instructor ratio amongst all the other faculties. The student-instructor ratio is 1 to 129.4 in Education Faculties, 1 to 88.7 in the Faculty of Economic and Administrative Science and 1 to 39.8 in the Faculty of Art and Science (Üstüner, 2004). Moreover, the establishment of new ECE programs in new universities without qualified and sufficient numbers of faculty members becomes a problem for ECE teacher education. A lack of instructors is an important problem in the ECE teacher education program since it consists of a variety of courses for which there are insufficient instructors to deliver those courses. The ECE teacher education program consists of a general knowledge course (25%), general teaching courses (21%), and field courses (54%) (Küçükahmet, 2007). To be precise, 28 field courses including special needs, visual arts, creativity or parent involvement are considerably different from each other and require specialization in those areas. In particular the music, computer usage in ECE, and special education courses suffer from a shortage of instructors and most of the universities have approximately 3 instructors. Walsh (2007) claimed that reality shock occurs when an individual does not feel well-prepared. The most salient criticism from beginning teachers about their teacher education program is that it does not have the necessary connections to real life due to its passive teaching and learning methods (Yalçınkaya, 2002). Therefore beginning teachers need to work with diverse groups of children with various interests, backgrounds and abilities.

The first year of teaching is the induction period for beginning teachers in Turkey. The school administrator is responsible for guiding beginning teachers and he appoints a mentor teacher for the beginning teacher with considerable experience in beginning teacher's field. Mentor teachers prepare a guiding program to evaluate the annual plan, daily plan, and the teaching practice of beginning teacher. At the end of the guiding program, the mentor teacher writes a report about the novice teacher. If the administrator approves that report, then the beginning

teacher officially completes the induction program successfully (MONE, 1995). Although written reports from MONE claim that the induction of beginning teachers proceeds as mentioned, in practice the induction program and the mentoring process do not work properly. They are treated as unwelcome obligations and beginning teachers and their mentors rarely meet. Mentor teachers do not observe beginning teachers' practice and do not conduct discussions with them about it. Neither do administrators provide effective guidance. As a result, the ineffective mentoring of first-year teachers practically leaves them on their own (Akbaba, 2002; Haser, 2009).

3. Discussion

Most professionals go through a certain period of apprenticeship before they start practising on their own. On the other hand, teachers are considered as full members of the teaching profession once they are hired with the title of teacher. Therefore the responsibilities of a beginning teacher are the same as those of an experienced one (Saban, 2002). In this sense graduates must socialise in the context of teaching practice, must become accountable for their students care and educational activities, and must interact with other school professionals and parents. These endeavours are believed to develop beginning teachers' own teaching expertise. There is a need to provide assistance to new graduates in order for them to adjustment into their new roles and environments. However, neither the induction period nor the mentoring process work effectively in Turkey. This is an intolerable omission in our educational system. The literature written on this issue also emphasizes the importance and effectiveness of the mentoring process in which professional knowledge is passed through experienced teachers to the novice. This circulation also helps in overcoming the difficult nature of the first year of teaching. Therefore, beginning teachers must be provided with mentoring support from experienced teachers in schools.

Another problem in the teacher education program is the scarce number of practice courses. There used to be four practice courses in the ECE teacher training program, but this was reduced to three in 2006. It might be meaningless to require first year student teachers to spend all day in preschool classes in order to observe what is happening without having enough knowledge about child development. Rather than decreasing the number of practice courses its semester could be changed so that prospective teachers do not miss the opportunity of knowing children closely, getting used to a class climate, or of improving their teaching practice.

The location of the school where pre-service teachers carry out their practicum course is also a vital issue. It is a fact that universities are located in city centres and students perform practicum courses in centre. Therefore, they are unaware of condition in deprived areas. Regarding the diverse socio-cultural structure of Turkey, it would be better to require prospective teachers to conduct their practicum course in deprived districts where the class size is high, structural quality is poor and parent's social-economical level is low. Confrontation with reality before becoming a teacher may reduce beginning teachers' frustration in public schools.

Pre-service teacher education is criticized as being too theoretical, having little connection to practice, and offering unrelated or ineffective courses for further processes, even in developed countries. The general complaints of a novice teacher, mostly, resulted from the discrepancy between the teacher training and the actual teaching experience. There is an urgent need to set close contact with the MONE and the teacher education programs to resolve leading problems of teaching. An emphasis on potential costs, concerns and instructional difficulties that a teacher might encounter, and strategies to overcome these difficulties, are required. It is also necessary to provide facilities for professional development and life-long learning; to help the candidates to gain a teacher identity by introducing the real aspects of the teaching profession in Turkey. It is evident that the faculties and both the MONE and private sectors must act with combined efforts for the purpose of well-designed training programs for both the pre-service students and for in-service teachers.

Beginning teachers are overwhelmed with lots of problems and as discussed these problems could be reduced by improving the teacher education program. School is not just the place for training the students; rather it is a complex organization with its culture, legislation, rules and rituals. Unfortunately, the teacher education program does not contain an administrative course to enable beginning teachers to overcome all those confusions. This kind of course may help beginning teachers to feel comfortable with formal climate of the school. Most of the provincial

universities are struggling with a lack of qualified academic staff but this course could be provided by public school administrators.

It is without doubt that nations need to keep teachers in the educational workforce and require educational institutions to become better work places and environments that will foster professional development (Jalongo & Heider, 2006). However, in Turkey 49 faculties of education are serving the ECE teacher education program. Most of them lack of sufficient instructors, physical condition and materials. Beside the difficulties of being a first-year teacher, the insufficient educational qualities of the recently mushroomed universities make matters worse. In this regard, AÇEV (2005) calls for the Higher Education Council to stop assembling new universities unless they reach international quality standards. Another problem that beginning teachers might encounter originated from regional differences. Unfortunately, poverty is a common problem all over the country, even in the capital of Turkey. In some parts problems go beyond poverty; that is, beginning teachers find themselves in a situation where they have to teach children who cannot speak Turkish. This problem cannot be solved by increasing the quality of the teacher education institution or increasing the quality of schools. It is impossible to serve teaching without communicating with children and their parents.

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