



BECOMING A TEACHER IN MULTIGRADE CLASSES

BİRLEŞTİRİLMİŞ SINIFLARDA ÖĞRETMEN OLMAK

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Abstract

The multigrade class is an instructional practice which teachers do not tend to favor. Trainee teachers are one of the stakeholders of the faculty of education who are highly likely to start their profession in multigrade classrooms and their views towards themselves, faculty, and the related instructional program will serve as feedback regarding the institutional procedures and educational programs offered. Based on this premise, this study endeavored to describe trainee teachers' views about teaching in multigrade classes, the faculty of education that they will graduate from, and the course titled Teaching in Multigrade Classes. The data in this descriptive qualitative study were collected through focus group interviews with eight trainee teachers in total, three of whom were female. The participants were nominated by their peers in their classes as promising candidates to be good at the teaching profession. In the study, trainees stated that teaching in multigrade classes was difficult but not impossible; that they found faculty of education to be inadequate in equipping them for this job; and that the instructional program for Teaching in Multigrade Classes could be designed to be more functional.

Key Words: multigrade classes, student teachers, faculty of education, needs, course.

Öz

Birleştirilmiş sınıf, öğretmenlerin çalışma konusunda çok sıcak bakmadığı bir öğretim uygulamasıdır. Mesleğe birleştirilmiş sınıflarda öğretmen olarak başlama olasılığı yüksek olan öğretmen adaylarının mezun olacakları eğitim fakültesinin bir paydaşı olarak bu konuda kendilerine, fakülteye ve ilgili öğretim programına dönük görüşleri kurumsal işleyiş ve izlenen eğitim programları hakkında geri bildirim niteliği taşımaktadır. Buna göre araştırmada, öğretmen adaylarından birleştirilmiş sınıflarda öğretmen olma konusunda kendilerine, mezun olacağı eğitim fakültesine ve Birleştirilmiş Sınıflarda Öğretim dersine ilişkin görüşleri tanımlanmaya çalışılmıştır. Betimsel nitelikteki araştırmada veriler, sınıf arkadaşları tarafından öğretmenlik mesleğinde iyi olmaya aday olarak gösterilen üçü kadın olmak üzere toplam sekiz öğretmen adayından odak grup görüşme yoluyla elde edilmiştir. Araştırma sonucunda adaylar, birleştirilmiş sınıflarda öğretmenlik yapmanın zor ancak olanaksız olmadığını, kendilerini bu göreve yetiştirme konusunda eğitim fakültesini yetersiz bulduğunu ve Birleştirilmiş Sınıflarda Öğretim ders öğretim programının daha işlevsel olabileceğini belirtmişlerdir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: birleştirilmiş sınıflar, öğretmen adayları, eğitim fakültesi, ihtiyaç, birleştirilmiş sınıflarda öğretim dersi.

1. INTRODUCTION

The multigrade class is a procedure based on assigning the responsibility of the education and instruction of more than one class within one classroom to a single teacher. It has been seen that the multigrade classroom is a fairly widespread practice in many developed countries as well as in such countries as Turkey which have not yet completed their social and economic development (United Nations Education Science and Culture Organization [UNESCO], 1981, 1982, 1988, 1989; Veenman, 1996; Cummings, 1986; Lungwanga, 1989; Lockheed & Verspoor, 1991; Thomas & Shaw, 1992; Psacharopoulos, Rojas & Velez, 1993; Birch & Lally, 1995; Son, Nga, Kich, My & Pridmore, 2002; Little, Pridmore, Bajracharya & Vithanapathirana, 2005). However, when the practices are examined, it can be observed that they have been implemented for three different purposes. To illustrate, one of these purposes is to provide compulsory education services in regions with low number of children and which are in geographically rural areas in many countries, including Turkey, which have relatively not yet completed their industrial and social development (Kline, 2002; Juvane, 2005; Aksoy, 2008). Another purpose of this practice is to ease social adaptation processes of socially and emotionally problematic students by keeping them together with children at different ages in classes in countries where social and economic development have relatively been attained, including New Zealand, England, Canada and Netherland (Allen, 1997; Gaustad, 1997; Little, 2006; Ministry of Education of Ontario, 2007). Yet another purpose of this practice is to facilitate children at varying ages and talents to learn together through taking one another as models, helping one another in areas of difficulty and interacting with individuals of different ages, again in the countries with the same level of development as a necessity of natural life (Veenman, 1996; Feldman & Gray, 1999; Kalaoje, 2002).

An important proportion of the teachers who work in multigrade classes is young with limited amount of professional experience (Kannapel & Deyoung, 1999; Özben, 1997; Yıldız, 2005). Meanwhile, because of the low population and poor facilities in schools in rural areas, it can be observed in various research studies and formal reports that particularly the teachers who have just stepped into the profession are unwilling to work in these schools, instead, they strive to work in schools with independent classes (Storey, 1993; Kannapel & Deyoung, 1999; Yıldız, 2005; Ministry of National Education [MEB], 2007). On the other hand, no research was encountered in literature that focuses on the views of trainee teachers about working in schools with multigrade classes. Instead, the research studies that have been encountered are studies that have examined the conditions, and expectations of pre-service teacher training practices in preparing for multigrade classes in faculties of education by focusing on the teachers who perform this job in schools with multigrade classes (Grippin, Sarachan-Deily, Medved & Lyon, 1985; Gibson, 1994; Özben, 1999). For example, the studies of Grippin et al. (1985) aimed to describe the degree to which faculties of education were sensitive to the needs of the teachers who would be working in rural areas. The participants consisted

of 29 educational administrators and 30 administrators of faculties of education in this study, which was conducted in the region of New York in United States of America. It was found in this study that faculties of education did not conduct sufficient research into determining the needs of the teachers who would be working in rural areas and therefore were not knowledgeable about the issue. Gibson (1994), in his research where he aimed to define the needs of the newly recruited teachers to Queensland, Australia from the dimension of instructiveness, found that an important proportion of trainee teachers experienced difficulties regarding issues such as preparing classes to learning, selecting appropriate instructional strategies for this structure, management of these schools, using instructional techniques particular to multigrade classes, and adapting instructional programs as relevant for multigrade classrooms. Another example is Özben's study on one dimension in his master thesis research that he conducted in collaboration with the teachers who were teaching in multigrade classes in Sinop (1999). He found that 84% of the teachers who participated in the study stated that the educational institutions that they had graduated from had not provided sufficient information about the work related to teaching-instruction practices in multigrade classes and school management.

In the duration of this study, one study has been encountered, though not on trainee teachers, which focused on pre-service teacher education programs in class teaching. This study, conducted by Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, and Millwater (1999), examined the Australian and global context. The researchers found that pre-service teacher training programs in many faculties of education were problematic with regard to covering the qualities related to the schools located in rural settlements. The aim of this study was determined to establish the views of the newly graduating teachers about working in schools with multigrade classes.

Teaching in Multigrade Classes Course Program

The pre-service class teaching program comprises four academic years with two semesters a year. The courses in the program, such as those in other teacher education programs, are categorized into three groups, which are "general culture", "subject matter" and "vocational knowledge". Teaching in Multigrade Classes is a 'subject matter' course and its content is defined to be theoretical, offered in the eighth semester of the program 2 hours a week. The content of the course is defined as the following (Council of Higher Education, 1997):

"The concept of multigrade classes; importance of education in multigrade classes; reasons that led to the emergence of multigrade classes; the structure of instructional program in multigrade classes; classroom management in multigrade classes; planning and evaluating the teaching-learning processes in multigrade classes."

The content determined by the Council of Higher Education has been enriched with the activities of examining the opportunities and limitations brought by course programs which were designed for the first five years of primary schools to be delivered in independent classrooms,

observing example practices of the course in its real context, and practicing at least one hour of class in a real context (Birch & Lally, 1995). The programs for the first five years of primary school have been organized under three groups in line with multigrade class practices and the principles defined by the ministry. In this work, preparation and planning activities towards at least one course from each group and example classroom practices were undertaken. In the first group are the courses that are delivered in groups, such as Life Sciences, Social Sciences, Science and Technology, and Religious Culture and Moral Conduct. The second group comprises Turkish and Mathematics courses, which are studied in the same hour but the needs of the students at different levels are tried to be provided through group-work by levels whereby students follow the program suitable for their own levels. In the third group, Physical Education, Music, Visual Arts and Counseling courses are studied by all the classes together within the same hour, but different grades or levels follow their own programs.

Problem

Besides the studies that show higher cognitive achievement in multigrade classes compared to independent classes (Psacharopoulos et al., 1993), there are studies that indicate little difference between the two modes (Veenman, 1995). In addition, some meta-analytical studies and large scale research on the subject claim contrary to the above, in other words, that the achievement of the students from the cognitive point of view is lower in multigrade classes compared to those in independent classes (Mason & Burns, 1996). Yet, one common finding reached by many researchers is that students in multigrade classes are emotionally and socially more successful, compared to those in independent classes (Aydın, 1997; Uçar, 1997; Russell, Kenneth & Peter, 1998; Little, 2001). Despite positive aspects, it can be observed that the opinions of school managers, families, politicians as well as a majority of teachers new in their profession regarding schools with multigrade classes are not quite positive (Gayfer, 1991; Vincent & Ley, 1999; Wilson, 2003; Şahin, 2003; Cornish, 2006; Özyürek, 2007). The perceptions of the new graduates of the faculty towards this situation were sought because, as the faculty of education, it is considered important to be informed about the views of trainee teachers at their initial stage of their profession regarding their concerns and hopes about working in multigrade classes as an important class teaching practice, particularly from the point of view of examining institutional procedures and educational programs through the study. In line with this, answers to the following questions were sought:

How do trainee teachers evaluate:

1. Themselves about teaching in multigrade classes,
2. Their faculty of education with respect to training them as teachers of multigrade classes,
3. The course 'Teaching in Multigrade Classes' with regard to their becoming good teachers in multigrade classes?

2. METHOD

A descriptive model was employed as this study was based on describing trainee teachers' views. The data for the study was not collected from a random sample to gain an average idea, but it was collected from group formed by the purposeful sampling technique, which allows for those at different ends with a certain characteristic to provide their evaluation of the research topic (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). Academic achievement was not taken as the criteria for the selection of participants of the study because it was understood that the achievement scores would not be of discriminating quality as they were very high, so the criteria used was 'being a promising candidate to be good' at the teaching profession. The selection was made by classmates in the classroom. Participants were selected with the votes of a total of the classes that the researcher had taught the Teaching in Multigrade Classes course at the primary and secondary instruction. To this end, the trainee teachers in the classes were asked to nominate 5 most promising candidates in their classes, excluding themselves, who would be successful in the profession. 2 students who received the most votes were selected in each class. 14 students were identified, but initially 5 of these and then 1 other participant left the study by stating during the pre-sessional interview that they would have difficulty attending the second interview session. A total of 8 candidates, 3 of whom were female, participated in the study. It was found that none of the participants had previously had the experience of being a student in a multigrade class and that they had led their lives in towns and city centers. Moreover, four participants stated that they chose to be class teachers willingly and the others stated that they had been forced to choose the profession for some reason at the beginning, yet they now liked teaching. At the time of the study, 7 of the participants were aged between 22 and 25 and one was aged 27. Of the participants, 2 were from Hatay, 1 from Burdur, 1 from İstanbul, 1 from Ankara, 1 from İzmir, 1 from Balıkesir and 1 from Antalya.

The interviews were conducted in two meetings, each of which lasted about one hour (first interview: 55 minutes; second interview: 50 minutes) as a semi-structured interview. The participants were asked the following questions: "What are your views about teaching in multigrade classes?; Do you think you can teach in multigrade classes? If you think you can teach in multigrade classes, what areas do you think will be easy and what areas will be difficult?; What are the effects of the faculty and the program you have taken in your training as a multigrade class teacher?; How should this program be delivered next semester?". These questions were determined on the basis of the results of research on multigrade class teachers and the experiences of the researcher. The interviews were recorded by a camera with the participants' consent. The transcriptions of the recordings were transferred to a word file by a stenograph, and the transcripts were checked by the researcher twice at different times and by two others who had taken the teaching in multigrade class course. The transcripts were shown to the participants to verify their talk. When the arrangements were completed, a total of 22-page long written document was obtained and made ready for the coding process.

The themes to be used to describe the data and the codes to be defined under the themes were determined according to the trainee teachers' evaluations of themselves, the faculty of education and the course program within their development process. The views of the participants about themselves related to teaching in multigrade classes were described under the theme 'difficult but not impossible'. The views of the participants regarding the role of the faculty of education in their training to become teachers in multigrade classes were described under the theme 'educational mission', and their views regarding the course on Teaching in Multigrade Classes on the basis of their preparation for the schools with such systems were described under the theme 'meeting their needs'.

The study was conducted at Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, Faculty of Education within the Class Teaching Program in the spring semester in the end of academic year of 2006-2007. The names mentioned in the study are not the real names of the interviewees.

3. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Being a teacher in multigrade classes

First, the views of the participants regarding their thoughts about being a teacher in multigrade classes were asked. An examination of their views indicates that the participants define the reasons that make working in multigrade classes difficult and the solutions that may be implemented to overcome these difficulties.

One interviewee, Emin, stated that being a teacher in multigrade classes is difficult because these schools are in poor conditions with respect to materials and equipment. According to Emin, another factor that increases the difficulty is the issue of adapting to the conditions of rural life in villages and the climate. Emin states these views in the following way:

"It is rather a difficult situation to manage to teach in multigrade classes. Particularly due to inadequate materials and equipment, children cannot be given quality education... I'm now sure but the conditions there are very difficult to adapt. The transportation everywhere is covered in snow, the winter."

Another interviewee, Mustafa, has similar views in this respect. He evaluates the issue from the viewpoint of the branch and the work in schools in city centers, and thinks that teaching in multigrade classes is very difficult if one considers the matter from this point of view. Mustafa associates the causes of this difficulty with two factors. One factor is to establish communication with people who are recognized as influential in village life, like the "imam" (official staff in Muslim community) and the "muhtar" (elected headman of village) who have the potential to be leaders. The other factor is to meet the needs of the students with disabilities. Mustafa states his concerns about students with disabilities in the following:

“... a student may be autistic (disabled). In this case, there is nothing for a class teacher to do. How can he do it, was he ever given any special training? We took an elective course but it was theoretical. We attended for one week and we skipped the other week. Even if we come across the topic, we go over it fast. We didn't study it in practice. There were a few such students in the village school we went for practice. The teacher could not do anything. What can he do, he is a graduate of a vocational high school. What can we do?..”

Zühal is yet another trainee who thinks that teaching in multigrade classes is challenging. She thinks that teaching in multigrade classes is something beyond altruism because there are students with diverse levels and that raising these students would take a lot of time. Zühal adds that students with disabilities are another factor that makes working in these classes hard. Zühal thinks in the same way as Mustafa, and was influenced by the state of the students with disabilities that she saw in the school she went for practice teaching and that this caused her to have some concerns about being able to teach because she does not think that the training she received in the faculty was sufficient. Zühal's statements on this topic are below:

“Special education will be challenging, because you teach students (with these characteristics) in special education but there was a student with a disability in the class. He could not do anything. He is way behind the whole class, he doesn't know anything. He cannot understand because of his level of intelligence. He doesn't know how to read or write. We need to offer him some kind of education but we did not get training for this.”

One other participant, Sevgi, stated that at first she had negative thoughts about teaching in multigrade classes but when she saw it in real life, her thoughts changed. She stated that the warmth and sincerity of the children there, small number of students and their positive attitude towards the teacher were effective in the change of her thoughts. About the presence of students with disabilities, she stated that she had similar concerns about them. The following are some of her statements on this topic:

“There is this one student. He only writes the questions and the answers. He just scribbled things. Nothing else. You can't understand anything. I was shocked when I saw him. I didn't know anything... We took special education course...I memorized it...”

Another interviewee who stated that it was difficult but not impossible to teach in multigrade classes was Duygu. She thinks that although multigrade classes are different from independent classes, the job is not that difficult if they can put what they know into practice and when they can get used to the life in the village. Duygu stated that everything depends on the individual. According to

Duygu, small number of students, doing activities according to levels and material development are important factors in making the task easier. Duygu, as similar to Sevgi, believes that the positive sides of the children will make it easier to teach at multigrade classes. Duygu thinks in the following way on this topic:

“...They are very receptive. They are really hungry for knowledge. They will take whatever you offer because they know their situation and they try even harder. It is good in this respect and there are students who will grow up to be much better if the teacher really makes the effort.”

Yet another participant, Yusuf, stated that teaching in multigrade classes is not different from teaching in independent classes but, similar to Emin’s views, he noted that the real problem was to adapt to village life. Yusuf claimed that if as a teacher he knows the intricacies of his profession and if he can make use of his potential, then teaching in multigrade classes will not create a challenge. He added that his main concern was the likelihood of failure of meeting his expectations and hopes and losing his enthusiasm in working in the event of such circumstances.

The two interviewees who had positive views about teaching in multigrade classes were Veli and Temel. Veli, like Yusuf, thinks that teaching in multigrade classes is not very different from teaching in independent classes. Similar to Duygu and Sevgi, Veli thinks that the small number of students, appreciation of the village life and contentment from being there will ease teaching in multigrade classes. Veli stated that lack of student interest would be the factor that would influence him the most, despite difficulty in teaching the students with disabilities due to poor facilities regarding materials and equipment. Temel is the other interviewee with positive views about the issue. Temel does not agree with the thought that teaching in multigrade classes was difficult. According to Temel, the conditions in the village will make the job easier, not more difficult because villages are small and everyone knows each other, which will facilitate working together and increase cooperation. He claims that earning respect from the community and being involved in life processes will facilitate teaching. Temel’s opinions are provided below:

“I think the smaller a community is, the faster and more productive you can be. Everybody knows each other there, we are one with them. If we can make the best use of the importance and value that the villagers place in you, then I think we can achieve very good results. ”

Faculty of Education

The views of the trainees about the effect of the faculty of education on teaching in multigrade classes comprise the answers given to the second question in the study. It is observed that

the views of the participants related to the role of the faculty of education in training teachers to teach in multigrade classes focus on the faculty's function as a teacher training institution and the values that it should have as a unit of higher education.

Temel stated that the faculty of education fails to fully provide trainees with training to ease the adaptation processes to the village life; that the training provided is not close to the real life conditions; and that the training is wrong. He added that the training at the faculty is built upon minimum competencies; that it was not concerned with improving to reach a higher level, but, in contrast, that it was dominated by formalism. Some selected views of Temel regarding the faculty of education are below:

"We don't know anything about the thing that's called agriculture. I mean we don't know how tomatoes, cucumbers are planted. How many people in our school know how to plant a tree?.. Do we know the names of the trees around this school I wonder?.. They taught us teaching methods, designing materials, they taught measurement and evaluation. But those who taught these, this system, did not practice the things they teach you to practice... I mean we came from such an educational system that said "don't make noise", "we don't want problems". But what happened in the end? We are going to suffer the pain because of this system. There is no quality in the system in the name of teacher selection, there is no system to screen the selected teacher... It seems to me that there is a struggle just at the minimum competence. This is the same in our school life. What is it, what did the teacher ask for, did he ask for this? Ok, we will write one page on a topic, we will write a one-page comment, and that's that. Paste three sentences and then send...Is this homework?.. We used to cover one book by six people. But how many of those six people actually know what is written in that book?.. I think for quantity to turn into quality there must be individuals to address these issues. If this is missing, then no matter how perfectly the program reflects reality, then it still won't mean much. (because)¹ the practitioner is useless."

Mustafa, who focused his opinions on the quality of education that is provided at the faculty of education, states that the education at this faculty is far from encouraging them to conduct research; that the assignment system fails to work; and that there are serious problems with the quality of students. Another participant who stated similar views on this topic was Veli. He stated that the faculty needs to discourage the trainee teachers at the faculty from memorizing and formalities; that what the system requires them to do and what the faculty asks them to do are completely opposite. Some of Veli's views are below:

¹ Inserted by the researcher to aid comprehension.

“Students need to be kept away from any kind of memorization and any kind of formal procedures. The most important duty about this falls on the shoulders of the teachers (faculty members). We somehow want to be trained as teachers who will keep their students from memorizing, and who will help them to be analytic thinkers and researchers of problems, but from the nature of the exam questions to the lecture style of the teachers, the courses they deliver to us and the grading system, everything is geared towards memorizing and formality... not all teachers are the same, but we have such courses and such instructors.”

Another interviewee who stated views about the quality of education at the faculty of education was Melek. She stated that the faculty does not bear the exact characteristics of a scientific environment; that the faculty members use grades to intimidate trainee teachers; that they are not open to criticism and that they do not have the features to be role models to develop themselves professionally and culturally. Some of Melek’s views on this topic are the following:

“Since faculty of education does not have much in its hands, it cannot change the system of the country. But what can be done? An educator can train teachers with full energy as a trainer. What does this depend on? This depends on teachers. Frankly, as a student here, this school does not offer such things, to be on the critical side. Things that will motivate us, turn us into idealistic teachers, things that will really develop us. There are few teachers who can add things to us culturally ... because all our teachers are doing things related to only self-development, development in their career paths or for their titles. There are few teachers who actually devote everything they have into their courses. There are only a few names that will be in my mind when I leave ... Teachers do not accept our criticism... Homework is assigned ... It gets downloaded from the Internet, students are threatened by grades... simple things are done. Things that are high school level. Frankly, there isn’t a scientific atmosphere here... People need to develop, research. But for curiosity not because it is homework ...”

Yusuf thinks that the faculty of education has a long past to call it well-founded in teacher training but this background is not used well. He stated that it is actually an advantage for the faculty of education to be small because then it is easier to move, and suggested that the credit weighting allocated to courses offered in the teacher training programs are not balanced. Some of Yusuf’s statements are below:

“...Multigrade class course should not be given two credits when there is the History of Art (course), I mean how was this arranged, how was it organized, I don’t know but really we are missing out on a lot...A teacher is trained within the classroom ...”

We don't know the value of this. The administration should recognize this ... They should recognize the value of being small in size ... Really, there is an atmosphere to feel as teachers, (yet) the garden is dead, the campus is dead, the desks are dead, it is important to manage the facilities... This is a school with a long history. We don't know the value of this. "

Duygu noted the negative sides of how the faculty programs are administered. Sevgi stated that the practice teaching the faculty member who would act as the vocational counselor in the practice schools was selected from a different program and that this person was not beneficial at all and that this should never be practiced.

The topic that Zühal dwelled on was rather related to the institutional structure of the faculty of education. Zühal explained that the faculty had a difficult time transferring the feeling of teaching, the practices push them to laziness, and that it failed to change their disorganized lives positively, thus she emphasized the negative effects of the faculty on their lives. Some of Zühal's views are the following:

"Actually, I am critical of the system. Some courses were given to us in these four years. If you ask the time when we felt we were becoming teachers, then I can say it started in our senior year... Moreover, everything was offered to us in a dispersed way in these four years and pushed us to be lazy in our free time, to lead disorganized lives and this condoned the idea of disorganized education. "

Emin views the problem from the angle of the quality of education and the facilities that the faculty offers to train teachers. According to Emin, a faculty should primarily offer social facilities to a trainee and the faculty members at universities who deliver courses should review and update their content. Emin thinks that if these are not done, then the faculty cannot train good teachers.

Course program

The trainee teachers' evaluation of Teaching in Multigrade Classes course program in schools which practice this type of instruction constitutes the findings of the third question of this study. It was seen that the views of the trainees concentrate on the needs regarding teaching in multigrade classes.

Yusuf thinks that the trip made for the purpose of familiarizing with multigrade classes was not beneficial because the choice of the school was not done well. Yusuf stated that the administrator of the school he had been to for practice had problems and that in the afternoons no classes were held in the school. He added that the teacher in the school could not take on the roles of a practice teacher; that this teacher gave ambiguous answers to their questions; and that the teacher avoided responsibility by saying "Why don't you fill in these forms?", about the forms which were supposed

to be filled in by the practice teacher. Yusuf stated that practice was seen by his peers as “drudgery”. The topics were touched upon quickly since there were few courses and that is why he could not learn much. He stated that the practice work in multigrade classes was more important compared to their internship and there should be more time allocated to such practice. Some of Yusuf’s opinions are below:

“...My school was not good. This may have been a problem due to the teacher ... In the last hour of the morning...I told the children the lesson was finished... I said have your lunch and come back, enjoy your meal. Students said, ‘We won’t be coming back, will we?’ I was surprised... We went to practice teaching for two weeks. Now, I’m telling you how we did the practice. We went there the first week, the school director, discipline, and so on. We stayed there until 12.00 and then the teacher came and they were closing the school and we went. We talked for about two hours and then we hopped on a bus and came back. The second week, when we went there, we were there at the school at about 7.30. The teacher came at about 9.00 anyway. We were 7, we all give Turkish language lessons, each of us could only do the lesson until noon for about 10-15 minutes ... We saw a multigrade class for one hour, that’s all. Then it was 12.00. Alright you go now. I mean this was all the practice we did in two weeks ... It is more of a must than an ordinary internship really. Because when you go to a multigrade classroom you do everything. The things should be organized more seriously, everything should be explained to students (trainees) and everything should actually be practiced, this is important. More activities could be offered about the physical structure, activities and life conditions there... A village school could be presented as an organized event. How does a village school work, how does it function? These could be presented before going there for practice. ”

Mustafa stated that he wished that the course would be offered in two semesters, and that it would be more suitable if institutional information were to be provided in the first semester and, practice work were to last for eight weeks, not two weeks in the second semester. Like Yusuf, he stated that he did not understand much from the practice he did because the period of time was not sufficient. Mustafa stated that, instead, each group should be assigned a village and thus the group would do practice for one semester in the school. Moreover, Mustafa suggested that the course should include examples from other countries to provide students with more of an international point of view.

Zühal, Duygu and Emin stated that they agreed with the idea that the period of time allocated to the practice activities in schools where multigrade class practice is undertaken should be increased; however, they did not have an opinion about the content. Erhan, contrary to what the others stated, thinks that the length of time for practice was sufficient but that the practice groups should constitute two people rather than six.

Another student who suggests that more time should be allocated to teaching practice in multigrade classes is Melek. She stated that “All of us support the idea that there should be more practice. This may be technically difficult... Primarily, we do not know much about the multigrade classroom practices in our country. We went and saw only a few.”, thus she criticized the content of the course. She added that “It could have been done this way: the practices of multigrade classes, course delivery, and a good course presentation could be shown from the Internet with examples... Theory really does not work because it really does not take place that way,” suggesting solutions with intensive use of technology.

Temel stated that the content of the course on teaching in multigrade classes did not have any problems, but the period was short and that it should be increased. Temel stated that the suggestion he had about the period of time was rather “utopic”. His suggestion is in the following:

“May be it will be rather utopic but the teacher could be recruited to that village for a week. It might be technically difficult but at least the teacher could be asked to go to a multigrade class school during a semester break. It could be a village school where he came from or the village he came from. Whatever you do there, bring me something. What do the people do there, what do the students do there? Go and see. Do an independent study. Produce something and bring it back.”

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The number of trainee teachers who participated in this study was low as consisted with the aim of this research. For this reason, the findings were interpreted as relating to the group described as “potentially good teacher” by peers, and not the entire trainee teachers in their senior year of the program. However, it is believed that research which will cover graduates in general on this topic will yield beneficial findings. Nevertheless, as an internal stakeholder of the faculty of education, the views of the trainees who are about to complete their education and who were nominated by their classmates as candidates to become good teachers in the profession are thought to constitute significant data in forming the quality assurance that would be necessary as regards the teaching and learning structure in the Bologna process (Moon, Vlasceanu & Barrows, 2003; European Association for Quality Assurance [ENQA], 2005; Eurydice, 2006; Ankara University, 2007; Kavak, Aydın & Altun, 2007).

An examination of the trainees’ views about teaching in multigrade classes shows that their opinions can be described under the theme of ‘hard but not impossible’. This theme can be explained under two sub themes, which are those that create difficulty for working in multigrade classes and those that form opportunities to help overcome these hardships. The trainees described the hardships

to be the village life, the presence of students with disabilities, the features of the schools and the special structure of multigrade classes.

According to the trainees, the first of the difficulties as related to villages is adjusting to the community life in the village and getting used to the climatic conditions. Moreover, trainees describe the presence of students with disabilities and insufficiency in materials and equipment as two factors that create difficulties for working in these schools. In addition, the topic of having students at more than one level in a single classroom is another difficulty area related to the special structure of multigrade classes. It is understood that these hardships of multigrade classes as a barrier for teachers led trainees to develop concerns about working in such schools. One of these concerns is related to being able to adapt to such people as the “imam” and the “muhtar” in villages, who have the status of official leadership within the community life in rural areas. Another one is related to being able to manage the difficulties related to the natural life in villages. Yet a further area of concern is seen to be related to having the competence to be able to help the students with disabilities. The reasons underlying trainees’ concerns about adapting to the rural community and natural lifestyle are that none of them have any experience about life in rural areas in their personal background and that faculty programs are not designed to provide opportunities for trainees to become familiar with the concept of rural life from the aspects of community and nature in rural areas. The trainees’ concern related to the sufficiency of their level of competence to work with students with disabilities is that they do not perceive themselves to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills. Trainees’ concerns related to overcoming difficulties of teaching in classes with more than one level of class in one room are related to the ineffectiveness of the courses on instruction and the ineffectiveness of the course entitled Teaching in Multigrade Classes, which is directly related to this concept in the program.

It was found that the findings related to the difficulty of adapting to rural lifestyle is consistent with Şahin’s finding (2003), which indicates that teachers find multigrade class instruction difficult due to the quality of life in rural settlements and the difficulties within the immediate environment. Moreover, the finding in the present study related to schools lacking in materials and equipment is consistent with the results found in Özben’s research with teachers of multigrade classes in Sinop (1999); the results stated in the project final report that Little and Pridmore (2004) reported as a result of a collaborative project they undertook to improve the quality of instruction in multigrade classes in England, Finland, Spain and Greece; and the results found in the research conducted by Erdem, Kamacı and Aydemir (2005) in Denizli on the teachers working in multigrade classes, all of which indicate that schools have problems regarding facilities. In addition, the finding in the present study regarding the difficulty posed by students with disabilities is consistent with the finding that Özben (1999) reached as a result of his study, which showed that 84% of the students were not competent. Furthermore, the finding that teaching to students at very different levels due to the presence of more than one class in one classroom, though not all trainees are of the same opinion, is in line with the

statements made by Wilson (2003) in the conclusion of his report which was prepared based on the research conducted on Scotland example and the finding that Kalaoje (2002) put forward as a result of the project he undertook in Finland.

From another vein, that the trainee teachers think that working in these schools is difficult but not impossible is considered important from the point of view of the way they practice self-affirmation. The trainees indicate the facilitating factors in overcoming difficulties of working in multigrade classes as the small number of students, students' willingness for knowledge and learning, students' sincerity, their own competence to prepare materials and equipment as teachers and familiarity with the people in villages. Moreover, trainees think that the confidence invested in them together with their willingness to live in the village form the fundamental emotional aspects in overcoming hardships of working as teachers in multigrade classes. The views of the trainees on this issue are also supported by the findings that Jakobson (2007) reached in his research. In that study, an evaluation of the views of teachers of multigrade classes in schools in Estonia showed that teachers show low number of students in classrooms and everyone knowing each other as factors that contribute to the willingness to work in these schools. The studies reviewed in the report by Kalaoje (2002) have a similar result. It can be stated that factors that explain the similarity between the views of the trainees in the present study and those of the experienced teachers willing to work in multigrade classes in the way that they both described the difficulties of working in multigrade classes and the facilitating factors to overcome these hardships may be due to school visits within the program, teaching practices in these schools albeit for one hour, and perhaps more importantly being candidates of good teachers in their profession.

It can be understood that the views of the participants about the faculty of education regarding teacher training for multigrade classes focus on the function and values that it should have as a unit of higher education. The participants stated that the faculty did not have an atmosphere of teacher training; that the faculty failed to use the background that it inherited with respect to teacher training; that the trainees could not feel that they were going to become teachers even when they reached their senior year because the programs and practices that the faculty pursued within these four years pushed them to laziness; that the faculty failed to possess the characteristics that are required of trainers as teachers and that although the trainees had taken courses about special education, they did not know how to teach in classes with students with disabilities. The participants stated that the faculty did not yet have an established scientific atmosphere as a unit of higher education with examples from the way courses are delivered, quality of assignments, measurement of their achievement, behavior and attitudes of faculty members towards them and their profession. The participants supported their judgments by stating that the courses were 'roughly' studied, course content was not updated so it could not be associated with real life since what was asked of them and the practices at schools clashed, assignments were done through 'copy-paste' method and that some of the trainees received

high scores from these assignments even when they had no idea about these assignments. The participants added that faculty members were not open to criticism about these issues and that they threatened them with grades so that they would do the practices and that there were few members of faculty who could be taken as role models. Some studies have been encountered on the evaluation of faculties of education in Turkey, though the number and range of these studies are limited. One of these studies was found rather interesting as it was conducted within the same institution about the same instructional program. Ceylan and Demirkaya (2006), in their research including nearly all trainee teachers in the senior year at the class teaching program, aimed to find their level of satisfaction about the services provided in the program. Ceylan and Demirkaya (2006) found in their study that the satisfaction level of the trainee teachers about freedom of self-expression in the classroom, meeting the current reality within the course delivery and program was at a medium or lower medium level. Moreover, in a research conducted by the Council of Higher Education with the aim of evaluating faculties of education with the participation of members of faculties, it was found that faculty members stated that the programs in the faculties of education were dysfunctional in training teachers, that the faculties were insufficiently equipped with physical and technological infrastructure and that their organizational structure was not suitable (Kavak, Aydın & Altun, 2007). It can be seen that the findings from these two studies regarding lack of a suitable atmosphere for teacher training in faculties of education, failure to be open to criticism by faculty members and the programs which lacked functionality are consistent with the findings of the present study.

The third question was related to the views of the trainees about the content of the course program, called Teaching in Multigrade Classes provided in their eighth semester. The opinions of the trainees were described under the concept of meeting their needs, for the reason that it is related to addressing their needs in teaching. The trainees did not find the content of the course sufficient to meet their needs particularly because it did not cover issues about becoming familiar with rural lifestyle and because the teaching practice that was included as extra curricular activities was limited. Some of the trainees stated that the characteristics of the practice schools selected for visiting and practicing within the practical component of the scope of the course, and therefore the characteristics of practice teachers involved were not in line with the expected results that are thought to emerge through this experience. The trainees think that there is an inconsistency between the high likelihood of being recruited in multigrade classes in their first post and the value given to this course among class teachers as well as people in the education community on the one hand, and the credit weighting allocated to this course within the class teaching curriculum on the other hand. In reality, it was found that this situation is not unique to Turkey and that similar problems are encountered in pre-service teacher training programs in other countries (Yarrow et al., 1999). In addition, Grippin et al.(1985), in their study in America and Gibson (1994) in his study on the newly recruited teacher candidates in Australia stated that the awareness level of faculties of education about the possible needs pertaining

to rural areas is low. Similarly, Little and Pridmore (2004) noted in their report on the project related to the multigrade classes in England, Finland, Spain and Greece that although multigrade class instruction is widespread in many countries, no course is included in this subject in faculty programs or the course included is given in a limited period of time of only for two weeks.

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