

Experiences of First Day of Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of this study is to investigate new teachers' first day expectation, challenge and coping strategies. In order to investigate this phenomenon 16 pre-service early childhood education teachers studying at the same teacher education program were interviewed immediately before their graduation. Participating teachers started to teach at different cities in public schools. Then, researchers contacted with them at the end of the first semester they taught to have another interview. Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological analysis was utilized to analyze the data. Findings have revealed that pre-service teachers were aware of some problems that they would probably encounter in their first day of teaching such as crying children. Yet, teaching children who did not know Turkish or teaching 56 children in their first day were not exactly what they expect initially.

Keywords: *Teaching, Experiences*

INTRODUCTION

It has been long assumed that first day of teaching has pivotal role to shape forthcoming school year (Flaxman, 1999; Kellough, 2009; Wong & Wong; 1998). Therefore, first day of teaching requires special preparation and implementation. It is the time for setting course purpose, discussing syllabus, and getting accustomed to each other (McKeachie, 2002). Well-planned and successful first day is indicator of successful year in which both students and teacher can satisfy their needs. Meeting with students and setting and explaining rules take priority among the many first day activities. If rules are not clear, relevant, simple, and straightforward, then the teacher should be ready for disorganization in the class (Brooks, 1985; Emmer, Everston & Anderson, 1980). Consequences of appropriate and inappropriate behavior should be predetermined and clarified in class and applied consistently to establish credibility and predictability (Emmer, Everston & Anderson, 1980). Effective primary grade teachers spend more time and use variety of instructional materials and motivate students by using praise in their first day of teaching. (Bohn, Roehrig & Pressley, 2004). Many studies have showed that early career stage of teachers is characterized by lack of confidence, frustration, anxiety, stress, self-doubt, 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; Evans, 1997; Gold, 1996; Huberman, 1992; Ingersoll, 2001; Stokking, Leenders, Jong, & Tartwijk, 2003; Veenman, 1984).

The first day of the class has long lasting effect on students. When students experience a positive first day, they have positive attitude towards both the course and the instructor, feel more motivated, and even have higher grades. On the contrary, students with negative first day experience feel less motivated even when the instructor behave kindly throughout the course (Wilson & Wilson, 2007). The literature on the first day of school concentrated more on elementary and high school students and teachers or even college students, and less on preschool students and teachers. This study aimed to investigate first day of beginning early childhood education (ECE) teachers by focusing on their first day expectations before they start the profession and the first day experiences when they start teaching. Investigating beginning teachers' first day experiences could bring a comprehensive understanding of what they need

and how they would overcome problems in that day.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was a part of a more comprehensive study investigating beginning early childhood teachers' first year experiences. As the more comprehensive study was conducted in two phases, the present study was also conducted in two phases. The detailed recruitment process of the participants for each study and data collection procedures are described below.

Study I

A total of senior 25 pre-service early childhood education female teachers who were studying at the same early childhood education program in Turkey participated in Study I. Participants had field experience courses in their 2nd, 5th, 7th, and 8th semesters in the program, each required them to spend one day per week during the semester. Although pre-service teachers were only expected to observe their cooperating teachers in their first field experience courses, they generally could not stay as non-participant observers, and engaged in teaching earlier than other teacher education students. They carried on field experience in private schools at the first three practicum courses and they gained experience in public schools at the last practicum course. All of the field practice schools were located in Ankara, Turkey and served middle and high income level parents; thus, participants had no experience with children coming from low income level and rural areas. The participants were in their end of the 8th semester when Study I was conducted.

The participating pre-service teachers were asked to imagine their first day in class with their students immediately before their graduation. They were interviewed through semi-structured interview protocol designed for the actual study. They had never been in a practicum school on the first day of teaching since practicum starts after schools were opened, and were asked to imagine their first day of teaching, expectations, preparation and coping strategies if they would encounter problems in that day.

Study II

Many participants of Study I were hired by the Ministry of National Education (MONE) to work at public schools due to the efforts in increasing the schooling rate in early childhood education in Turkey. Considering that the participants mostly had private school experiences in a large capital city, Study II participants were chosen among the Study I participants who were working in public schools and were likely to have a first day experience in an unfamiliar context. A total of 16 participants working in 10 different cities in Turkey were recruited for Study II and it was performed after the first semester that participating teachers taught. They were asked about their experiences in the first day of teaching, their preparation process, and their experiences. Three participants provided written answers for the interview questions since they worked in the most distant cities during the study.

Data Analysis

The phenomenological analysis developed by Moustakas (1994) was used in this study to analyze the data. The interviews conducted for the study were transcribed verbatim for the phenomenological analysis. The analysis started with highlighting significant statements that provided an understanding of the how participants experienced the phenomenon. Then, the meaning or meaning units are listed from the significant statements. Researchers removed overlapping and repetitive statements so that clusters and themes had appeared. Textural descriptions of the experience was formed using clustered themes and meanings and essence of the phenomenon were constructed (Moustakas, 1994). Data analysis process was monitored by researchers in the field of teacher education and early childhood education. Participants were referred by "P" followed by a number.

FINDINGS

Study I

Participants' perceptions and expectations about their first day at school was asked in order to investigate the types of problems or supports they thought they might have at schools. P1 summarized all participants' expectations of first day:

"Due to separation anxiety children might not want to come to school, do not want to come into the class. I know that the type of children I will meet first day are crying children... When I imagine first day it is a chaos".

P3 associated her concern with being an ECE teacher:

"I do not know what should I do or what should I say... but I have self doubt. Do I look like a teacher? If I were a content area teacher I would explain units, I would ask their expectation about course... Content area teachers' first day is easy but ECE teachers' [first day] is not".

They expected chaos in the class where many children would cry and not knowing what to do lead some participants to plan the first day ahead. P9 expressed her imagined first day as follows:

"Probably it will be most planned day of my teaching life...I might plan an activity involving parents. I meet parents, children get know each other...children introduce themselves and mention about their characteristics".

Participants seemed to plan to focus on helping children to overcome their school anxiety due to being separated from their parents in their first day. P15 was planning to separate children from their parents step by step to lessen their fear of being alone in the class:

"Children might insist that their mothers do not leave class. At first I let mothers to stay in class then they will stay in front of the door. I mean mothers leave the class step by step so that it would not be a sudden separation both for children and parents".

P7 claimed that she would try to make children take possession of class so that they would get used to school easily:

"I will ask children to bring something from home in order to make children take possession of class or they will draw a picture and hang it on wall. I want to create a sense of community in the class".

P12 remembered her first day in an ECE class when she was a child and her problems. She expected to receive the support that beginning teachers might need:

"I went to ECE class for a week and I remember my first day that I really struggled. It was difficult to get used to other children and the teacher. Besides, it was difficult to be separated from mother and to come to school... I suppose there is a guide to inform me about children. I think schools never suddenly leave teacher with children alone. At least if I had a school I never leave beginning teacher with children".

Study II

Even in normal circumstances handling first day of school is difficult for new teachers. This study showed that Ministry of National Education's (MONE) inappropriate practice made first day of teaching even more troublesome for novice teachers. Infrastructure problems and delay in teacher appointment for public schools were main problems originated from MONE itself. In this study most of the participants were appointed after school opened which made them start to teach suddenly. P5 exemplified a typical entry into teaching in public schools:

"We visited school for getting information about school. I have not applied for official procedure. We just visited the school to see. Administrators had so many works and they were busy. They asked me to enter class in that day. I accepted"

MONE's unorganized hiring policy increased negative effects of sudden entry. Beginning teachers would have some time to get used to school and local culture where the school is located. However, MONE appointed teachers with delay and beginning teachers lost that chance to orient themselves in an unfamiliar situation. P3 expressed her negative feelings in following quotation:

"Our appointment was delayed. Normally we needed to start on September 1st but my start-up was September 18th. I came and started. There was no orientation for me. I was not familiar with this town, I was not familiar with school, and I did not know anyone. I hope it will not happen to this year's newly appointed teachers. They would be appointed in August and know where they will go. I arrived in town with my father and here you go I started. It was just like a nightmare. I do not even want to remember."

First day of teaching was not much different than what beginning teachers expected. Teachers had to deal with crying children. P1 mentioned about her first day:

"First day many many children cried... First week passed with crying children and separation anxiety. We could not make activities orderly in the first week. Just orienting and enjoying school [activities]".

First day of school is even more difficult with young age groups. Number of children in young age group is restricted according to early childhood education legislation. Yet, administrators sometimes register more children than the class capacity. Large class size and having young age group made things harder for P5 in first days. Fortunately, all of the participants were well aware that chaotic class atmosphere was temporary and it would last quite a while until the class order settle down. She was not panicked and handled the situation:

“First days passed terribly. I think 24 children were even too many for 6-year-old class. Besides, some of the children were too young. They were 2.5 years old. I was surprised. [Her mother] brought such a small child into class. I would not do that. They were all crying. Especially 8 children were crying badly. They were crying madly. They were not ready. They cannot separate from mothers. School made an unreasonable decision by registering such a young children...They were all crying and I realized that it was meaningless to play or do something else. Nothing else took their attention. They were screaming, struggling desperately due to their mother’s absence. I found it hard to handle children but I was not panicked that much. I knew that it was a temporary situation.”

Keeping 3-years old children in class was considered as accomplishment at first day. P9 explained difficulty of working with young age group:

“My first day in class was very difficult. I chose to work with 3-year-old children but first 10 days passed with regret. I remember that I said: I wish I had chosen 6-year-old children. I had 13 children...They were continuously crying...they were escaping class to see their siblings at upper classes.

I was sitting in front of the door. Children were shocked at first day. Beside I was kicked and hit [by children]”

Uncertainty stemming from lack of experience was characteristics of the first day of teaching. Even though they prepared daily plan and activities before coming class, all of the beginning teachers had time management problems in first days. Beginning teachers needed some time to set the flow of day. P2 mentioned about her first days:

“It has finished in 3 or 4 hours. I felt that I do know anything. As if I did not study ECE program. I was puzzled what to do. Then I gave painting papers. I said Oh! Should I have given this? I was panicked. [Daily plans] were not enough first 2-3 months and I was going with 2-3 plans.”

Beginning teacher’s problems could not be restricted in first days rather whole week can be considered as settling down process in school as illustrated by P4:

“After talking about what we are going to do whole day, we looked around the school. We showed dining hall and sleeping room. First week passed with crying children and children who did not want to separate from mother. Besides activities was not conducted regularly because [we wanted to] made them just get used to school and love school. Let them play with what they want to play. It passed freely.”

Similarly, P10 expressed how hard her first week of teaching:

“I could not even differentiate as first day. My first week was a chaos. Let's say. I was not even aware of what was I doing because there was a bunch of things that I did not know which one I should handle. I was trying to know people, children, and parents. Everything simultaneously came over me.”

Even though participants expected challenging first day of teaching, their experience exceeded what they predict in remote areas. Beginning teachers sometimes experienced region specific problems. Substantial regional differences between eastern and western part of Turkey caused some problems for teachers. P6 was unable to use most vital tool for teachers that language:

“I was shocked when I saw preschool children. We could not communicate because children did not know Turkish. There were 60-70 children and 6-7 teachers in class and it was exactly a chaos”.

P13 found her own solution for children who did not know Turkish:

“At the beginning we communicate with body language. 3 or 4 children know Turkish. The others understand but cannot speak. Some of them neither understand nor speak. I used body language and showed visual materials...To say “sit down” I show sitting”

Challenges of first days even affected teachers’ health. Twelve participants lost their voice in first weeks because of speaking loudly or using wrongly. Problems with P8's voice continued throughout year and caused inconvenience in her teaching:

"I had pharyngitis when I began to teaching. I lost my voice for ten days in first semester. My voice still goes time to time. It is awful. Nothing can be worse than losing voice for teachers. I am still in a difficulty and I cannot speak for a long time."

Beginning teachers' fear and concern about being responsible of all class diminished in time as stated by P11:

"At first I frighten a lot. I was thinking in practicum course that what would happen, if I totally in charge of this class. I was seriously frightened. Would I be able to manage? Would I be able to direct? Is a problem going to arise? Would I be able to make crying children calm down? However, I had a courage when I began. My fear has gone".

Not all beginning teachers experienced problems in their first days. P14 explained why she did not have much trouble in first day:

"Additionally, I did not experience much trouble the first days because we played so much play. I did not let children free. We continuously played, and sang. There was a continuous action. We never sit and conduct table activities. We continuously played, jumped, played music and made sport. It passed like that."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined how pre-service teachers feel about their first day of teaching and their preparation for that day. Findings indicated that pre-service teachers feel insecure about their first day and they do not feel ready to handle first day of teaching. They expected to experience chaos in class because of crying children which makes them suspect their self- efficiency, proficiency to keep young children under control, content knowledge and ability to meet the needs of all children, parents, and administrators. Participants had concerns about their self-confidence both before starting the profession and at the beginning of the profession. According to Fuller's (1969) teacher concerns theory, teachers' primary concern is self oriented and focus on being successful as a teacher at the beginning of profession. They are concerned with their self-efficiency and suspect their proficiency to control classes, their content knowledge and meeting the needs of students, parents, and administrators. However, teacher's concerns lessen as they gain experience (Ghait & Shaaban, 1999). The first day of teaching was not much different than what beginning teachers expected. Almost all of them had to deal with terribly crying children and tried to make them calm, get used to school, and accept their mother's absence in class. They even spent weeks attempting to settle down classroom activities. At first teachers allowed parents to enter class to lessen children's fear and make them feel secure in class. Then, they sent parents away step-by-step. After that, they tried to introduce school, daily routines, and basic rules.

The findings of this study revealed that most of the problems originated from MONE's system itself. Unfortunately, standards are changing region to region in a distinct way in elementary and secondary education. Participants were expecting to meet crying children in their first day of school. Nevertheless, they did not expect to encounter large class population for young age groups, start to teach in the middle of semester, and teaching children who did not know Turkish. Several problems might stem from sudden increase in schooling rate in ECE as the increase in the quantity of ECE classes brings the question of quality. Twelve participants experienced some sort of difficulties because of infrastructure problems and material shortage. For instance, two participants were appointed in schools which are still under construction and two participants were appointed to schools which do not have ECE classes. The others experienced infrastructure problems in different levels. Infrastructure problems did not always appear in school structure. In some situations schools were totally ready and children were already registered but teacher appointment did not take place on time. Infrastructure problems negatively affected parents, administrators, and children, yet the worst outcome is for beginning teachers. They might be disappointed greatly and lose their enthusiasm with the negative start in profession For instance; one of the participants had to teach 56 students at first days since other two teachers have not been appointed yet. Considering that classroom management is one of the biggest problems of beginning teachers, large class size might affect their teaching practice severely (Wyatt & White, 2007; Fottland, 2004; Pigge & Marso, 1997). The increase in classroom population decreases child-teacher interaction as it limits the capacity of teachers to deal with behavior problems (Essa, 2003). Although infrastructure problems are characterized in remote areas, it also appears in more developed cities.

The beginning teacher's entry into teaching profession is sudden, immediately after graduation they have the same responsibility with the experienced teachers (Lehman, 2000). MONE recruitment policy makes this situation worse since beginning teachers should have some time to orient themselves in a new profession and local culture where the school is located. However, beginning teachers were hired after schools opened and they lost that chance to get used to unfamiliar circumstances. Furthermore, they did not expect to encounter a construction area instead of a fully organized class, large class population for young age groups, starting to teach in the middle of the semester,

and teaching children who did not know Turkish. Beginning teachers already feel puzzled because of their inexperience and those infrastructure problems make beginning teachers' first day even more chaotic.

MONE curriculum also results in additional problems as the education system in Turkey highly centralized and teacher education program does not include any course about regional differences. Most of the children in eastern part are bilingual and their mothers do not speak in Turkish; however, sole and similar teacher education programs for all population do not consider target population's characteristics (AÇEV, 2002). Participants in this study did not work with children coming from different socio economic background during their undergraduate education. They had worked with children with middle and upper-middle socio economic status. They did not meet what they were trained for and they did not have time for getting ready for this unexpected situation. As such, this study addressed the weaknesses of early childhood teacher education programs in training teachers for children with diverse backgrounds and for managing the challenges in the first days in teaching. Besides, current study pointed out that most of the problems take its roots from cumbersome bureaucracy in MONE. Yet, the findings of the study was limited to the self-reports of the participants. Observing beginning teachers in their first day of teaching could bring a comprehensive understanding of what they had experienced and how they would overcome problems in that day.

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