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A Head-Start to Teaching: Exploring the Early Field Experiences in Pre-service EFL Education in Turkey

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INTRODUCTION

Sociocultural turn in the field of TESOL has addressed the issues of teacher learning, second language teacher education and its knowledge base (Canagarajah, 2016; Johnson, 2006, 2009). Addressing such issues has challenged the taken-for-granted assumptions, which historically viewed second/foreign language teachers as technicians, and these teachers were expected to employ pre-packaged methods with their underlying strategies and techniques (Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Prabhu, 1990). Further work on teacher learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), characteristics of language teachers and their cognition (Borg, 2003, 2006) and identity formation in language learning and teaching (Peirce, 1995; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005) have called for a critical understanding of second language teaching and teacher education. With the sociocultural turn in the field of TESOL, Freeman and Johnson (1998) rightly suggest that

> the core of the new knowledge-base must focus on the activity of teaching itself; it should center on the teacher who does it, the contexts in which it is done, and the pedagogy by which it is done. Moreover, this knowledge-base should include forms of knowledge representation that document teacher learning within the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which it occurs (p. 397).

Constructing the new knowledge-base for second language teacher education (SLTE) as suggested above focuses on how second/foreign language teachers learn to teach and grow as professionals in English language teaching. Second language teacher education programs are the environments in which pre-service language teachers construct their content knowledge, begin to form their professional identities and learn to teach. Their content knowledge professional identities and learning to teach emerge during the field experience courses and school practicum

because in order to document how second/foreign teachers learn to teach in their diverse settings, field experiences continue to be an integral part of the curriculum of pre-service teacher (PST) preparation programs (Lux & Lux, 2015; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996).

Field experiences are generally offered in the final year of the second/foreign language teacher education programs at universities in Turkey. Field experiences at universities in Turkey are divided into two phases. In the first phase of the field experience, pre-service language teachers are required to carry out a set of classroom tasks during it. These tasks consist of observing the cooperating teacher's lesson, compiling reflective journal, conducting mini-lessons, and reporting. In the second phase of the field experiences, pre-service language teachers are required to prepare teaching materials and assessment tools, to attend reflective sessions with the cooperating teacher(s) and faculty members, and to teach assigned topics under the supervision of a mentor teacher. Hence, field experiences are the environments in which pre-service language teachers face the realities of the language classroom and start to invest in their individual and professional capabilities in terms of language teaching (Ceylan, Uştuk, & Çomoğlu, 2017). Although field experiences and school practicum courses offer one-year of engagement with the realities of language teaching and language classroom, they can have immense impact in (re)constructing pre-service teachers' cognition about language teaching.

In addition to field experiences, some SLTE programs offer early field experiences. In these courses, pre-service teachers have a prolonged opportunity to explore and experience language teaching, and develop their sense of plausibility (Prabhu, 1990) through 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie,1975). In doing so, language teachers can be more capable of "adapting to the emerging issues in the changing ELT praxis" (Karataş & Karaman, 2013, p. 10). Thus, this

study aims to document the experiences of pre-service EFL teachers, cooperating teachers, and university collaborators in a structured early field experience.

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REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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The literature review of this paper includes two sections. In the first section, we provide terminological underpinnings of the field experience and explain key terms of the study. In the second section of the literature review, although limited, we offer a review of relevant literature.

Definitions of Field Experiences

Different terminology has been used in the pre-service teaching programs to refer to the field experiences. Some have used clinical experience (Tasgin & Kucukoglu, 2016; Tok & Gehrke, 2012) to explain the nature of field experiences in terms of clinical practice which aims to equip practitioners with necessary skills, strategies, and techniques to improve their practice. It is believed that clinical practice during the field experiences create opportunities for pre-service teachers to improve their teaching skills (Grossman, 2010). While clinical experience sees pre-service teachers as technicians who are supposed to be equipped with necessary skills and master to perform the profession as in the case of medical doctors, Yuan and Lee (2014) use the term "teaching practicum" to refer to the teaching experiences of pre-service teachers in their final year of undergraduate studies. In teaching practicum, pre-service teachers are expected to master the content knowledge of the teacher education program. Upon mastery of the content knowledge, pre-service teachers are offered with the environments where they possibly face real-life classroom issues (Baltacı-Goktalay et al., 2014) and they are encouraged to (re)construct their content knowledge upon the feedback of their peers, mentor(s) and supervisor(s). Thus, teaching practicum can allow pre-service teachers to turn their theoretical knowledge into a practical one and it can help them become a member of the teaching profession (Gan, 2013). In

addition, teaching practicum can offer chances for awareness-raising of community issues and positive change (Merç, 2010).

Lastly, Zeichner (2010) used the terms field experience and student teaching to refer to field experiences. Field experience and student teaching cover a wide range of experiences pre-service teachers have during their student teaching and early field experience. Also, the terms include identity formation, (re)structuring the knowledge base of second/foreign language teaching as well as legitimizing the work of pre-service teachers. It is emphasized that field experiences can be an important tool to understand various perspectives on teaching and learning (Zeichner, 2010).

For the purposes of this article, we have adopted the term 'field experience' in order to explore the experiences of pre-service teachers in an early field experience because while many of the research in teacher education focus on student teaching and practicum experiences, current research on early field experiences is limited. This article focuses on the experiences of PSTs, cooperating teachers (CTs), and the university supervisors during a semester-long field experience in an undergraduate teacher education program in Turkey. The literature that is outlined in the section that follows will focus on broader international research due to limited research studies in the Turkish context. However, Turkish context of field experience is also described based on the available literature to provide a clear understanding.

Research on Field Experiences

On both international and local scale, various studies have been conducted to explore the practices of student teaching and field experiences in language teacher education programs (Celik, 2008; Coffey, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Lux, 2013; Merc, 2010; Sleeter, 2008) because field experiences are considered to be essential for PSTs in order to reconsider, question

and challenge their beliefs about language teaching and learning (Burns & Richards, 2009; Burns, Freeman, & Edwards, 2015; Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1987; Gan, 2013). Sleeter (2008) states that participation in multiple field experiences in different schools and areas including schools in underserved and disadvantaged areas provides PSTs with an early exposure to various contexts and claims that it is through these experiences that PSTs are pushed to challenge their biases and shift their beliefs.

In line with the assumption that field experiences are the sites where PSTs can reconsider and challenge their beliefs, many of the field experience studies focused on views, expectations, and needs of PSTs, university supervisors and CTs (Fernandez & Erbilgin, 2009; Haciomeroglu, 2013; Ronfeldt & Reinninger, 2012). Camlibel-Acar (2016) explored the effects of 'Teaching English to Young Learners' course and classroom observation on third year pre-service EFL teachers in a state university. Results indicate that PSTs pinpointed the benefits of complementing a university-based course with actual classroom practices. In another study, Çelik & Topkaya (2017) examined pre-service teachers' teacher self-efficacy perceptions. They found that lack of teaching experiences and turning theory into practice in terms of syllabus design, assessment and evaluation and classroom management lower PSTs' teacher self-efficacy and they concluded field experiences contributes PSTs teaching self-efficacy positively. Similarly, Uztosun (2016) compared PSTs and in-service teachers' efficacy beliefs about teaching English to young learners. Commonalities between PSTs' and in-service teachers' efficacy beliefs were found as both groups mentioned classroom management, curriculum and technology related issues.

In other studies, while Ulusoy (2015) investigated PSTs retrospective and prospective evaluations about the classroom teacher education program, self, and the teaching profession,

Hatipoğlu (2015) questioned the readiness of PSTs in terms of English language testing and assessment. Çınarbaş (2016) explored experiences of pre-service teachers with visual impairment and suggested that assignment and tasks for special needs groups of PSTs should be differentiated and individualized. Lastly, Farrell's (1999) study focused on three English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' in Korea and their reflective practices. As a result of his study, he recommended group discussions among teachers to be the most fruitful. Following Farrell's lead, Liou (2001) studied twenty Taiwanese English teachers and made similar recommendations on strategies for increasing reflectivity in their teaching.

However, it is claimed that field experiences are not necessarily occasions for PSTs to apply theory into practice, but rather occasions for observing teaching practices (Zeichner, 1996). The studies mentioned above challenges this view and suggest that field experiences can be converted into fruitful environments in terms of preparing PSTs for quality language teaching by emerging theory with field experiences. Rosaen and Florio-Ruane (2008), and Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) support different initiatives to be implemented in order to rethink the field experiences as more productive learning contexts for PSTs. These initiatives include the creation of campus-based laboratory schools (Fraser, 2007), creating on-campus courses where PSTs would be able to do simulation of their teaching (Grossman, 2005). It can be inferred that field experiences play a key role in PSTs' preparation as teachers in training (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Morrow, 2007).

To conclude, although available literature provides the views, perceptions, and needs of PSTs, the scope of these studies in terms of providing insights into the real experiences of all parties involved in field experiences is rather limited. Still, improving the quality of teacher preparation and teacher learning programs is essential as faculties of education in Turkey aim to

prepare qualified teachers. Thus, early experiences of PSTs in schools can establish the foundation for teachers' careers (Graham, 2006) and in order for these early experiences to be successful and fruitful, there must be a structured and cooperative collaboration between universities and schools. The following section reviews the field experience and student teaching practices in Turkish context in order to provide a better understanding of the current condition.

Practices in Field Experience and Student Teaching in Turkey

The Turkish Ministry of Education Project-Higher Education Council restructured teacher education programs in order to improve the quality of teachers and increase collaboration among schools and universities with an emphasis on field experiences of PSTs (Kiraz, 2003; Simsek & Yildirim, 2001). Since the year 1998, the Higher Education Council in Turkey have implemented a standardized curriculum at Turkish universities. The curriculum includes a sequence of courses that include content, general education, and pedagogical knowledge. In addition to the courses enrolled, the PSTs would also have to complete practicum requirements. Often times, the common practice is to place student teachers in field experience and student teaching practicum during their senior year of the undergraduate degree. Student teachers are given a series of assignments to complete while at their placements. Although student teachers and supervising faculty are expected to meet with each other, many universities are understaffed to provide this support. Although the Faculty and School Collaboration Guide (2007) issued by the Turkish Higher Education Council identifies the guidelines that define the nature of the practicum and field experiences, it is up to the individual faculties of education to determine the duration and requirements.

Within this process the English Language Teaching Department at the Faculty of Education of a private university investigated under this study, pre-service EFL teachers are

required to start their field experiences as sophomores and continue to attend field observations

for four semesters and then complete their student teaching practices when they are seniors.

Although starting the field experiences may provide an early understanding of the schools in

general, the impact of the program is currently unknown, as it has not graduated any students yet.

The pre-existing field experience course has not been established rigorously yet to provide

collaboration between the university and the CTs. The current program also did not distinguish

field experiences to differentiate among the various fields of pre-service education. Therefore,

the current restructured model of the course introduced structured experiences in the classroom

for EFL PSTs in order to prepare them for student teaching and beyond. This article reports

findings of a semester-long field experience model with pre-service EFL teachers in an

undergraduate English Language Teaching (ELT) program in southeast Turkey.

Practice teaching (practicum) in teacher education has been one of the contested issues in

Turkish higher education institutes. In Turkey, Higher Education Council regulates the mandates

for the field experience and the practice teaching components in teacher education programs.

There are minimum requirements that each PST need to meet, and it is up to the individual

teacher preparation programs to devise their own standards just to meet the minimum

requirements or to go beyond the minimum required. Many universities choose to follow the

minimum but with the founding of many private universities and the competition among them,

some faculties of education revised their curricula to implement early field experiences in their

programs. The university where this study took place was also one of the private universities

that believed in the importance of early field experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this research

was to explore the restructured model that the faculty started implementing for pre-service EFL

teachers' field experiences in order to enhance reflective professional growth. The guiding

research question for this study was: 'What are the experiences of EFL PSTs, CTs and university professors (UPs) in a structured field experience in southeast Turkey?'

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach to research was used in this study (Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research allowed the researchers to explore the lived experiences of the participants. It is essential to take a closer look at 'issues in depth and detail and approach fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis that contribute to the depth, opened and detail of the qualitative inquiry' (Patton, 1990, p.13). Through the use of various data sources such as interviews, observations, focus groups, student work, video and audio recordings, the meanings that the participants made were brought to surface and their voices were illuminated (Merriam, 2002). In addition, the combination of data from different sources through triangulation was employed to check the accuracy of findings in this study (Stake, 1995). Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggest 'triangulation of multiple sources of data' to demonstrate transferability of the research (p. 201).

Exploring pre-service teachers', cooperating teachers' and university professors' experience within an early structured field experience aligned with interpretive phenomenology, as the study explored the reality of life as a pre-service teacher, cooperating teacher and the university professor and being part of a structured field experience in classrooms (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixmith, 2013). Interpretive phenomenology also guided the data collection, data interpretation, and analysis by both the researcher and collaborative participants (Tuohy et al., 2013). Interpretive phenomenology recognizes the inter-subjectivity between the researcher and the phenomenon, honoring the data of the researcher experience along with examining the phenomenon from many perspectives of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Although other qualitative designs might have been used to study these experiences, the research question sought to understand and interpret the phenomenon of pre-service teachers', cooperating teachers' and university professor's experiences of an early structured field experience in the teacher education program, were most appropriately studied through an interpretive phenomenological design (Moustakas 1994; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In addition, the open-ended questions and observations of non-verbal clues in a qualitative study with pre-service and practicing teachers allowed for description and explanation of the phenomenon considering the personal, subjective teacher views, interpretations, and experiences as reflective practitioners within their unique settings (Creswell, 2018). Interpretive qualitative research allowed the collection of rich data with attention to the nuances and details of the multiple realities of the participants through direct quotations, experiences, and other non-verbal information (Padgett, 2004). During interpretation and analysis, qualitative research also allowed for participant interpretations of the phenomenon of early structured field experience in the teacher education program (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Participants

The participants for this study were forty-four EFL PSTs, eighteen CTs in public schools, one UP and a research assistant (RA). The PSTs consisted of twelve males and thirty-two females. All of the pre-service teachers who were enrolled in the field experience seminar in the pre-service education program were invited to participate in the research. The consent for participation was collected at the beginning of the semester by the RA and kept in a locked drawer until the grades were released and then of the sixty students who were invited to participate forty-four agreed to participate. Purposeful sampling was employed in this study in order to reflect the diversity and breadth of the sample population, and particularly in

phenomenological research choosing participants who share significant and meaningful experience related to the phenomenon is significant (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Of the 60 PSTs fourty-four agreed to participate and this added to credibility and reduced bias in selection (Nastasi, 2004).

The CTs participating in this study were five males and thirteen females, working at public high schools as EFL teachers. Their years of experience ranged from five to twenty years. The UP had teaching English to speakers of other languages experience in public schools and supervised PSTs at graduate schools in the U.S. The RA also had teaching experience in public schools and familiarity with the school system in Turkey.

Setting

The context for this study consisted of five public high schools located in an urban district in a large city of southeast Turkey. The university that hosted this study was a private university the mission of which was to educate practice-oriented students who would have variety of teaching experiences in various settings so that they would be better equipped with the skills to apply theory into practice. For this reason, the PSTs at the faculty of education started their field experiences as sophomores and were required to complete six semesters of field experience and/or student teaching.

Data Collection Phases

The data for this research were collected over time in three phases, which are described in detail below.

Phase I: School visits and recruitment of participants

The UP and the RA visited over 20 high schools located in the district in order to identify potential teachers who were willing to serve as the CTs. From the 20 schools and fifty teachers

visited, eighteen teachers volunteered to participate in this research. The next phase of the research was conducting focus groups with the participating teachers that would be described further in the next section.

Phase II: Focus group with teachers

In order to inform CTs about the process and to discuss their roles and responsibilities, the researchers conducted focus groups at participating schools. During these focus group sessions CTs ideas and suggestions were taken into consideration for the purposes of planning the field experience. These focus group sessions were audio and video recorded and the researchers took detailed field notes.

Phase III: Information session & matching, meeting, greeting

The PSTs were scheduled for an information session about the field experience. They were provided with the copies of field experience handbook and the syllabus. The researchers also described the process in detail and clarified any confusion that may have risen. This meeting was also video, and audio recorded in order to go back to it during data analysis. At this meeting the students were assigned to different CTs in groups of two or three randomly. The students were given a week to meet with their CTs and discuss their placements.

PST field experience

As part of the field experience PSTs were supposed to complete minimum of 40 hours field experience that consisted of both observations and partial teaching responsibility in ten weeks. In addition to the time spent at placements, there was also a weekly seminar that the PSTs attended. These seminar sessions were dedicated to discussing PSTs' experiences and providing them with a platform where they could exchange ideas and talk about their placements. All the assignments completed through the course of the semester were compiled into a portfolio that the

researchers graded with a rubric at the end of the semester and used as a data source. The portfolio consisted of field experience journals kept by the PSTs, lesson plan deconstruction assignment, partial responsibility of teaching one class, observation notes, and other field experience materials collected through their field experiences.

Reflection

The last phase of the data collection was to receive feedback from all parties on how the field experience went and reflect upon everyone's experiences in order to improve future practices. During this phase, the PSTs, CTs and UP were interviewed and the obstacles and benefits of the field experience were discussed in detail. All the interview sessions were video and audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Ethical Considerations

In compliance with the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), research permission letter was sent to local school district's Director of education explaining the nature of and the value of the study and requesting permission to proceed with recruitment procedures for the school district teachers to voluntarily participate in the study. Upon receipt of permission from the district Director of education to proceed with the study, permission was secured from the university's IRB prior to collecting any data. The invitation and informed consent letter have been approved in the IRB process. Confidentiality was maintained by keeping consent forms separate from interview transcripts. The PST's consent forms were kept in a sealed envelope until after the end of the semester in order to address any potential researcher bias. Only data from those PST's who agreed to participate in the study were used in the study. Additional confidentiality was secured by using pseudonyms for participants, school names were not, and

will not be disclosed, and even the school district name will not be disclosed without permission from the school district Director of education.

Data Analysis

The data were first organized into files that included various data sources. The field notes were also coded line by line. All the participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. All the video and audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Then these transcriptions were coded into categories. The RA and the UP separately read the transcripts and came up with themes. Then the researchers met again and discussed the themes that emerged from the analysis and agreed upon common themes. Per phenomenological study recommendations by Moustakas (1994), transcripts from interviews were carefully analyzed, and data was sorted into meaningful categories in order to visualize the patterns and connections for emergent themes. Themes and categories were further examined for subthemes, thematic constructs, and connections between the categories in order to synthesize the essence of experiences of PSTs, CTs, and the UP. After the data were analyzed, it was shared with the participants to make sure that it was accurate. Member-checking (Stake, 1995) provides validation of data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Through the analysis of the data, three main themes emerged. This section describes the themes of the study and relates emerging themes with the available literature.

Impact of early field experience

The field experiences are treated as arenas that allow PSTs to be able to apply the theoretical knowledge that has been taught in university classes into real life contexts of schools.

Therefore, early field experience provides PSTs unique opportunities to better understand the dynamics of teaching and learning processes.

One of the benefits of early field experience is that since PSTs are exposed to observation sessions earlier than their peers, they are able to develop a sense of empathy for working as a teacher and accordingly they have more time to internalize the teaching profession as one of the PSTs, Kemal stated 'Today as I observed my CT, I put myself in her shoes and thought of ways how I could improve the lesson and make it more interesting and beneficial for students' (Journal entry). Moreover, Damla explained 'My deconstruction of the lesson of my CT helped me to understand the different stages of a lesson' (Video Recording). This is the feeling shared by almost all of the PSTs participating in the study. From these statements and many other PSTs' responses, starting their field experiences early allowed them to gain awareness and was helpful in preparing them for future practice. Early field experiences created opportunities for PSTs to observe, understand and learn the challenges of language teaching through apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975). Also, it is in these early field experiences that the PSTs in this study was able to develop their sense of plausibility (Prabhu, 1990), which helped them grasp the dynamics of the language classroom.

From the PSTs' perspective the benefits of starting the field experiences early outweighed the challenges. For example, Deniz stated, "Even though it was tiring and challenging, I became more aware, educated and experienced through this experience" (Interview transcription). Another PST, Canan commented, "There were many things to do for this class, but it was nice to be among students and experiencing language teaching earlier" (interview transcription). From these statements and many other PSTs' responses, starting their field experiences early allowed them to gain awareness and prepared them for future practice.

From the analysis of the interviews and the focus groups that were initiated both at the beginning and the end of the field experience, overall CTs felt that the field experience was beneficial for PSTs. At the beginning one teacher, Zehra, mentioned,

"I felt like a fish out-of-water when I first started teaching. It is a wonderful opportunity for these students to have a real-life experience before they start teaching in their own classes" (focus group transcription).

Sultan the CT recommended, "You should include an assignment for students to closely examine administrative duties at school, so that they can be familiar with how the school system work when they start teaching" (focus group transcription).

From the interview with the UP and the data collected, UP's observation supports the statements made by PSTs' above. The UP explained her findings as a result of the observations during the interview and stated that 'The field experience allowed students to become more conscientious about the realities of language teaching, help them to develop their skills in designing lessons that integrate various strategies that they are able to apply from theory to practice' (Interview transcription). The goal of the field experience classes was to structure experiences in the classroom and to prepare students for student teaching and beyond. Participants' statements about the benefits of early field experiences are in line with the field experience literature which suggests PSTs find various chances to use their theoretical knowledge to enrich their language teaching skills (Burns, Freeman, & Edwards, 2015; Camlibel-Acar, 2016; Celik, 2008; Coffey, 2009; Çınarbaş, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Lux, 2013; Merc, 2010; Sleeter, 2008). In addition, early field experiences allowed the participants to engage in theoretical and practical issues to construct a knowledge base in which theory informs practice (Johnson, 2006, 2009).

Field experience as an opportunity toward reflective professional growth

Among the principles of professionalism and professional growth is engaging in reflective practice. It gives indispensable opportunities to PSTs to discover the nature of teaching profession. As mentioned above, this bears some risks because students are expected to benefit early field experience without adequate amount of theoretical foundation. However, benefits outweigh risks and challenges when it is looked into from PSTs' perspectives. For instance, one of the participants in the study, Derya stated, 'I had a difficult time completing the required hours, but I believe that it prepared me for the future. I have gained more self-confidence.' (Interview transcription).

Because of the nature of working in induction years, the UP explained, 'The PSTs became too nervous as they were not used to being observed. They also hesitated to initiate conversation with their CTs in applying new methods as their self-confidence was low' (Audio recording). But in the process, PSTs had opportunities to challenge such obstacles as a PST, Sude expressed her feelings that 'I learned to prepare a lesson plan, teach and manage a class.' (Interview transcription)

The opportunities early field experience can provide is not necessarily limited to the activities happening inside the classroom. The early field experience can also facilitate PSTs' understanding of how schools work and dynamics, school culture and traditions, code of ethics. In regard to this, A PST, Emin said that, 'I learned how to behave in the staff room and I learned so much about best teaching practices' (Interview transcription).

Early school experience has plenty of opportunities for PSTs but they are not the only stakeholders who benefit from such early exposure. A CT, Atakan expressed his appreciation by stating that "It has been seven years since I graduated, and I have not had the opportunity to

engage in professional development activities. Being a CT will allow me to reflect upon my own practices and learn from PSTs" (Interview transcription). Therefore, this process becomes mutually beneficial for both PSTs and CTs. In fact, it was revealed during focus group discussions and interviews that during every step of this research, CTs expressed their thoughts in favor of early field experience that starting the field experience early is a necessary component of teacher education programs and expressed their overall satisfaction with hosting PSTs at their schools.

Being exposed to early field experience leads to discovering the teaching profession as it is with its challenges. A CT, Ruken came to the conclusion upon working with PSTs that 'Some are born as teachers, but others need intensive practice to become qualified.' (Interview transcription) Cemal, a PST, also added 'This term I prepared a lot of materials. Even if they are hard, I can frankly say that I learned a lot' (Video recording). Canan's expression supports the insight PSTs gained in this process that 'I observed different students with different learning styles, it prepared me for the future' (Interview transcription).

Such early practices facilitate not only students' understanding of the profession but their psychological development as well. In this respect, a PST, Mesut said, 'Real teaching was the most useful, I started to feel confident and believe that I can do it.' (Journal entry), Gamze's statement was 'I felt like a teacher for the first time.' (Journal entry) and Meva added, 'I love teaching. It's a great profession' (Journal entry).

All of the above statements by the PSTs prove that even though early field experiences are found challenging by them, they still find it rewarding. It is seen as a tool toward growing and becoming a reflective teacher (Burns & Richards, 2009). Additionally, Canagarajah (2002) states that when engaged in reflective practice through wider professional discourses and

practices, the construction of praxis emerges with the local experiences. In the case of this study, both CT and PSTs devised opportunities in which both parties reflected their own practices through these early field experiences.

Overcoming obstacles and meeting challenges

In this study, PSTs were asked to start early field experience when they were sophomores. From the data collected and analyzed, it was discovered that early field experience has certain benefits as well as obstacles attached to it. Among the benefits understanding how it feels to become a teacher as a PST, Hakan commented, 'There were many things to do for this class, but it was nice to be among students and experiencing teaching earlier' (Interview transcription).

Although the PSTs had reported to gain positive experiences, there were also many complaints about the demands of the field experience. For instance, Cengiz described his overall experiences as 'there were too many tasks' (Seminar discussion).

Seda on the other hand, reported, 'I feel very young and inexperienced to take responsibility and to teach in a class' (Interview transcription). Ahmet added 'I have seven different classes, so field experience tasks are difficult for me' (Seminar discussion). Based on students' perspectives, demands of the field experience were difficult and they did not feel prepared to take full responsibility. The number of courses that they had to take was also too many making it challenging to balance the time necessary that they needed to allocate for each course.

From the RA's interview with the UP, the overall field experience was challenging in itself. The biggest challenge she mentioned was,

"Supervising forty-four PSTs alone. It was very difficult to schedule observations and provide the necessary feedback to PSTs on their teaching and all the other assignments. I also did not have any financial support to be in the field, so it was additional burden to cover all the expenses" (interview transcription).

The course load as well as the supervision made it difficult for the UP to able to manage everything well. She also believed,

"The field experience allowed students to become more conscientious about the realities of teaching, help them to develop their skills in designing lessons that integrate various strategies that they are able to apply from theory to practice" (interview transcription).

The goal of the field experience classes was to structure experiences in the classroom and to prepare students for student teaching and beyond; therefore, the goals of the field experience were met successfully. Moreover, she recognized,

"The PSTs' main challenges were their linguistic and methodological incompetence. From my observations, I witnessed that many struggled with classroom management, time management and adjusting their classroom language and voice" (interview transcription).

The challenges stated by the UP seemed to mainly relate to the way that the pre-service education program was structured. Additionally, the UP described the PSTs' lack of emotional readiness,

"The PSTs became too nervous as they were not used to being observed. They also hesitated to initiate conversation with their CTs in applying new methods as their self-confidence was low" (interview transcription).

From the UP's statements it is clear that despite the obstacles faced, the field experience was fruitful for PSTs and all participating parties.

Obstacles and challenges of early field experiences stem from two main issues. First, there are individual challenges for PSTs as some of the PSTs experienced language proficiency and linguistic competence related difficulties and obstacles. Review of doctoral studies in Turkey between 2010 to 2014 revealed that similar conclusions that PSTs experience several problems during their second language teacher education and field experience courses (Özmen, Cephe, & Kınık, 2016). Parellel to Çelik and Topkaya's (2017) and Uztosun's (2016) studies, PSTs' individual challenges also include classroom management and workload issues. Second, obstacles and challenges of early field experiences can be caused by institutional policies and practices. In such a case, "curriculum change cannot involve the top-down imposition of expertise from outside the community but should be a ground-up construction taking into account indigenous resources and knowledge, with a sense of partnership between local and outside experts" (Canagarajah (2006, p. 27). In doing so, second language teacher education programs can help PTSs to be autonomous language teachers.

CONCLUSION

Early field experience holds a crucial place in the PST education. It is a great opportunity for PSTs to develop their own teaching beliefs and gain confidence (Sleeter, 2008). PSTs learn to be reflective and develop decision-making, and problem-solving skills (Gebhard, 1990). Through this experience, PSTs have the chance of applying theory into practice (Lee & Loughran, 2000). The research in this area is critical to improving the quality of teacher training and education (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullan, 1991). Therefore; this study explored the experiences of the PSTs studying at a private university, the CTs working at public high schools and the UP supervising the PSTs via qualitative methods. Through the analysis of the qualitative data, three

themes emerged; the impact of early field experiences, field experience as an opportunity toward reflective professional growth and overcoming obstacles and meeting challenges.

Starting the field experience early had various impacts. The PSTs were able to gain awareness toward the teaching profession as a result of the early field experiences (Zeichner, 1990). They had the opportunity to evaluate themselves and to determine the areas of need that they had to improve, thus they tried to focus more on their university courses (Hastings & Squires, 2002). They developed a better understanding of theory as they were engaged in the classroom practices. As Chepyator-Thomson and Liu (2003) suggest in their study, a well-organized and supervised early field experience might allow PSTs to develop actual teaching skills.

Field experience was seen as an opportunity toward reflective professional growth by both the PSTs and the CTs. During the study the teachers expressed their gratitude for the opportunity. The PSTs were anxious about teaching and discussing their role in the beginning (MacDonald, 1992), yet they gained more confidence in time (Byrd & Garofalo, 1982). The PSTs reported to have increased willingness toward becoming a teacher. They were a part of the teaching team for a while and for the first time they observed and analyzed the school system from a teacher's perspective. This helped them to be better prepared for their future career (Tang, 2002). The opportunity to reflect on their practice and discuss their views was significant. Hole and McEntee (1999) describe reflection as a practice of rethinking and changing by examining a particular event. Through reflection the PSTs and CTs had seen their weaknesses and looked for ways to develop themselves professionally (Buchanan & Stern, 2012).

Even though conducting an early field experience was rewarding for the PSTs, it was not without challenges and obstacles. They were challenged by the tasks required as part of their

teaching practice as they had not completed the pedagogical knowledge classes (Mau, 1997). Also, they reported not being able to allocate as much time as they wished to prepare for the practice, mainly because the PSTs had to take different classes simultaneously with their field experience. Thus, the field experience assignments were viewed as a burden from time to time. The PSTs also mentioned that they felt stressed about being observed and they were nervous when teaching in a real class as they felt themselves to be linguistically and pedagogically incompetent. Merc (2010) also found that the student teachers were the most anxious when expert teachers observed them. The UP stated the need for more supervisors to improve the quality of the field experience and how she was challenged by lack of economical support coordinating with teachers and visiting the schools.

This study analyzed the experiences of PSTs, CTs and a UP in a structured early field experience program to better enlighten the areas in need of improvement, lead to change and help increase the quality of teacher training and education.

IMPLICATIONS

The research exploring the early field experiences was limited; therefore, this study was critical to figure out how starting field experiences early in a structured program might affect the PSTs professional growth. This study bears various implications for PST education and for further research. Early field experience helps PSTs challenge their beliefs and develop their own philosophies from the very beginning of their career, thus these experiences should be structured meticulously to make it as fruitful as possible. It should be designed effectively to open a space for reflection and application of theory into practice.

The PSTs reported and observed to have been challenged by the lack of methodological and linguistic classes. These classes might be empowered by the inclusion of more practice and

critical inquiry. The students start their field experience as sophomores, yet they have to attend six different courses simultaneously. This limits the time the students need to allocate for their field experience. The curriculum of EFL teacher training programs should be reconsidered so as to decrease the number of different courses and to increase the credit hour of field experience.

Cooperating with classroom teachers is a good opportunity for their professional development as well. CTs inquire their own teaching and daily practices as they are observed by the PSTs and they have to rationalize their routines to explain and discuss with the PSTs. UPs also benefit from this collaboration as they step into the field, they conduct more practice-oriented research. This type of school-university collaboration should be increased for a better education.

To make the field experience more comprehensive and influential, the number of students assigned to each CT and UP should be limited. This way the PSTs will get the most out of their experience as they will have more time to discuss their beliefs and practices, also the CTs and UPs could provide more extensive feedback to each student under their supervision. Incentives and financial support should be given to the faculty supervising the PSTs, as they have to travel back and forth among different schools. Finally, further research might look into the effects of early field experience for a longer period of time and a longitudinal study might explore how this process would contribute to the teaching of the graduates of the program.

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