

What Difference does Placement School Make? Contribution of School Characteristics to Professional Growth of Pre-Service Teachers*

Uygulama Okulları Nasıl Fark Yaratır? Uygulama Okulu Özelliklerinin Öğretmen Adaylarının Mesleki Gelişimlerine Katkısı

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Öz. Bu nitel, fenomenolojik çalışma, uygulama okullarının öğretmen adaylarının mesleki gelişimlerine yaptıkları katkılarla ilgili öğretmen adaylarının algılarını anlamaya çalışmaktadır. 2012-13 eğitim-öğretim yılında Türkiye’de bir devlet üniversitesinde uygulama dersleri almış her biri altı son sınıf öğretmen adayından oluşan dört grup ile yapılan odak grup görüşmeleri yoluyla toplanan nitel veriler içerik analizi yoluyla analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular beş ana tema oluşturmuştur: Uygulama okuluna ilişkin anlayışlar, uygulama okullarının özellikleri, uygulama okulu deneyimleri, uygulama okullarının mesleki gelişime katkıları ve uygulama okulu seçimi ve deneyimi için öneriler. Sınıf öğretmeni adayları, kaynak zenginliği veya bolluğu ile özdeşleştirilmiş avantajlı uygulama okulunun anlamını tanımlama eğilimindedirler. Ancak, bu çalışmanın en çarpıcı bulgusu, iyi uygulamaların kaynak zenginliği veya uygulama okullarındaki bolluk gibi diğer faktörlerden ziyade daha çok uygulama okulu öğretmenlerinin niteliğine bağlı olmasıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Uygulama okulu öğretmeni, uygulama okulu, sınıf öğretmeni adayı, mesleki gelişim, öğretmen eğitimi

Abstract. This qualitative phenomenological study attempted to gain insight into perceptions of pre-service teachers about the characteristics of placement schools in relation to their contributions to their professional growth. Collected through focus-group interviews with four groups, each consisting of six pre-service teachers who were in their last year in the program and had already taken practice courses at a public university in Turkey in the 2012-2013 academic year, qualitative data were then subjected to content analysis. The findings generated five major themes: conceptions of placement school, placement school characteristics, placement school experiences, contributions of placement schools to professional growth, and suggestions for placement school selection and experience. Pre-service primary school teachers tended to define the meaning of a better-served placement school that was equated with resource richness or abundance. However, the most striking finding from this study was that great placements were largely dependent on the quality of mentor teachers rather than other factors like resource richness or abundance in placement schools.

Keywords: Mentor teacher, placement school, pre-service primary school teacher, professional growth, teacher education

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Introduction

When student teachers (hereafter called pre-service teachers) are sent to the schools selected for field experiences (hereafter called placement schools), they often find themselves in a bizarre situation (Cole, 1995). They are no longer passive recipients of information presented solely by teacher educators, nor are they highly qualified teachers ready to undertake the responsibility of the classroom on their own. Therefore, pre-service teachers spend most of their time in placement school observing and assisting mentor teachers or planning and teaching lessons. Such experiences help pre-service teachers learn the tasks and skills necessary to teach independently in regular classes. Furthermore, these practices eventually help them make more meaningful connections between theory and practice. The field experience can thus be regarded as one in which pre-service teachers must establish a balance between what they have learned in conceptual courses and what they gain from field placements (Cole, 1995).

Ronfeldt (2012) argues that teacher education programs may benefit a lot from using better-served placement schools for students' teaching practice since experiences under supportive and desirable circumstances contribute more to teacher retention and student achievement. On the other hand, the literature also presents views that underserved ones may develop pre-service teachers' problem solving and decision-making skills more (Yıldırım, 2013). So, it appears that there is disagreement in the literature in relation to the gains student teachers have in different types of field placements.

Where pre-service teachers should learn to teach might be at least as important as what they should learn to teach because their activities are shaped by the settings where they learn to teach including the people, places, and things gathered there (Grossman, Ronfeldt, & Cohen, 2012). The present study has attempted to address this question because very limited research has focused on the impact of placement schools of different quality on pre-service teachers' professional development in Turkey (Yıldırım, 2013). Findings of the current study may help teacher educators select placement schools and organize field experience in a way that pre-service teachers will be ready to teach in different kinds of schools in the future. Otherwise, field schools whatsoever may be selected, and this may cause a mismatch between pre-service teachers' and mentor teachers' expectations (Fletcher & Luft, 2011).

Research on the Impact of Placement Schools on Pre-Service Teachers

Placement schools with different characteristics may influence pre-service teachers in different ways. In their review, Cochran-Smith, Villegas, Abrams, Chavez-Moreno, Mills, and Stern (2015) identified six major study strands of teacher preparation and concentrated on studies investigating the impact of student teaching on learning to teach. As one of the three lines of research, Cochran-Smith et al. (2015) cited the studies addressing the impact of school-related factors such as climate, culture, policies, and resources on sense of self as a teacher (Graham & Roberts, 2007; Mahlios, Engstrom, Soroka, & Shaw, 2008; Tang, 2002).

Ronfeldt (2015) tried to describe the kind of placement schools that would predict future teacher performance and concluded that teachers who practiced teaching in placement schools with good collaboration quality, stronger gains in achievement, and less turnover were eventually more effective in improving student performance. However, these schools were less likely to be preferred as placement schools because others (Haberman, 1995; Hargreaves & Jacka, 1995) argued that experiences pre-service teachers gained in such schools left them unprepared for harsh conditions of underserved schools (cited in Ronfeldt, 2015).

According to Ronfeldt and Reininger (2012), the effect of student teaching is greater when it is in schools with disadvantaged groups. Its quality positively influences teacher outcomes such as teachers' perceptions of career plans, teacher efficacy, and instructional preparation (Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012). But, the characteristics of placement schools do not predict teachers' perceptions of instructional preparedness, teacher efficacy, and career plans (Ronfeldt, Reininger, & Kwok, 2013). Self-perceived quality of teachers is more often pertaining to the characteristics of student teaching while their career plans are more often associated with the characteristics of teacher (Ronfeldt, Reininger, & Kwok, 2013). For example, practicing teaching in schools consisting of students who had more limited English proficiency (LEP) predicted stronger desire to teach underserved students (Ronfeldt, Reininger, & Kwok, 2013). However, pre-service teachers' underserved preferences, which increased across practice teaching, were not mostly related to working with underserved students (Ronfeldt, Kwok, & Reininger, 2016). For instance, pre-service teachers who practiced teaching in schools consisting of more LEP students reported that they strongly preferred teaching English language learners in the future. The literature indicated that pre-service teachers' efficacy levels did not significantly differ on income and English proficiency of students in the placement schools but were found to be significantly higher for those in placement schools with high-achieving students (Moulding, Stewart, & Dunmeyer, 2014). However, Cole (1995) argued that field placements did not have an influence on teaching efficacy of pre-service teachers.

Ronfeldt, Schwartz and Jacob (2014) found that teachers who were exposed to more methods-related coursework and practice teaching felt more prepared and were more likely to stay in the profession. These positive relationships tended to be stronger not only among urban, rural, and secondary school teachers, but also among mathematics and science teachers, graduates of prestigious colleges, and males (Ronfeldt, Schwartz, & Jacob, 2014). Moreover, coursework with the embedded field experiences contributes to pre-service teachers' perceptions of coherence as well (Grossman, Ronfeldt, & Cohen, 2012).

Urban and diverse field placements often present so challenging contexts that they sometimes cause negative attitudes of pre-service teachers toward resources and appearance and atmosphere of these schools prior to their placement. However, after the experience they have in these contexts, they develop more balanced views of these schools (Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008). Pre-service teachers place more importance on socioeconomic and ethnic diversity after their field experiences although they view school security and parental support as the most important characteristics before and after their field experiences. Pre-service teachers are yet reluctant or unable to be in distant placement schools because of their dependence on part-time jobs (Skilbeck & Connell, 2004). Therefore, teacher education programs often have difficulty finding available placement schools within their geographic proximity.

Field placement influences pre-service teachers' beliefs about learning and instruction as well (Fletcher & Luft, 2011; Hoy & Rees, 1977; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990; Zeichner, 1980; Zeichner & Grant, 1991). Pre-service teachers' field experiences in both primary and middle schools alter their beliefs about teaching from traditional to contemporary (Fletcher & Luft, 2011). However, many of the pre-existing beliefs of pre-service teachers about teaching are stable (Kagan, 1992) and traditional (Hoy & Rees, 1977; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990; Zeichner, 1980; Zeichner & Grant, 1991). Pre-service teachers' beliefs about learning which are contemporary in nature remain constant (Fletcher & Luft, 2011). Tarman (2012) investigated how pre-service teachers' field experiences influenced their perceptions of and beliefs about the teaching profession. The findings revealed that negative experiences of pre-service teachers at different school levels influenced their perceptions of and beliefs about the teaching

profession. According to the outcomes of this study, pre-service primary school teachers were more likely to become a primary school teacher due to their negative experiences in secondary schools. The same was also true for pre-service secondary school teachers. Pre-service teachers' experiences in rural placement schools influenced their beliefs about the profession as well. Geographic distance between placement schools and faculties of education also has an impact on pre-service teachers' beliefs related to teaching and decisions to become a teacher. Moreover, it reduces the quality of pre-service teacher supervision and restricts communication and collaboration as well (Sharpe et al., 2003).

Lloyd (2008) found out that field placement could influence curriculum use of pre-service teachers. Teaching small groups in placement schools enables pre-service teachers to pay more attention on their lessons. However, teaching a small number of lessons multiple times makes pre-service teachers teach less than intended. Teaching in the sort of "physical isolation" (Goodlad, 1990, p. 211, cited in Lloyd, 2008, p. 87), namely teaching without being observed by mentor teachers, which is common to pre-service teachers, also reduces the quality and extent of interactions between pre-service teachers and mentor teachers. Therefore, pre-service teachers are left alone in the classroom with their own curricular decisions (Lloyd, 2008) although they are encouraged only to play the role of their mentor teachers (Cole, 1995) and to learn through socialization caused by placement schools (Zeichner & Gore, 1990).

In Turkey, researchers have not too much focused specifically on the impact of the characteristics of placement schools on pre-service teachers' professional growth. Rather, they have studied problems pre-service teachers face in the placement schools (Demircioğlu, 2003; Odabaşı et al., 2011; Özen, Ergenekon, & Batu, 2009; Sılay & Gök, 2004), views of pre-service teachers (Bilgin-Aksu & Demirtaş, 2006; Bural, 2010; Çetin, Uludağ, & Akın, 2007; Erdem & Erdoğan, 2012; Kale, 2011; Köroğlu, Başer, & Yavuz, 2000; Şimşek, 2013; Yeşilyurt & Semerci, 2012; Yıldızlar, Kargı, & Ünal-Bozcan, 2011) and other stakeholders (Çetin & Bulut, 2002; Ünlüönen & Boylu, 2007; Yalın-Uçar, 2012) on the courses, namely School Experience I and II and Practice Teaching (hereafter called practice courses), and pre-service teachers' expectations from placement schools and stakeholders (Aslanargun, Kılıç, & Acar, 2012; Korkmaz, Gücüm, & Hakverdi, 2006; Sağ, 2008; Şahin, 2010; Şahin, Erdoğan, & Aktürk, 2007; Yeşil & Çalışkan, 2006). But, findings from some of these studies are mostly related to the characteristics of placement schools and their classrooms rather than their effects on pre-service teachers' professional development. For example, pre-service teachers mostly had difficulty in transportation (Erdem & Erdoğan, 2012; Kale, 2011) and wasted time because placement schools were too distant (Kale, 2011). Placement schools are not available for technological infrastructure although pre-service teachers especially the ones studying in the Department of Computer Education and Instructional Technologies need it more (Odabaşı et al., 2011). Pre-service science teachers also find experiences with technology valuable for their professional development (Korkmaz, Gücüm, & Hakverdi, 2006). Furthermore, pre-service teacher satisfaction from field experiences is most significantly predicted by the use of technology in placement schools (Şahin, Erdoğan, & Aktürk, 2007). However, it may not always be possible to select placement schools in which pre-service teachers gain rich technology integration experiences (Brush & Saye, 2009).

Because most public placement schools lack materials and sources, the activity called "Materials and Sources in Schools" does not fully serve its purpose (Köroğlu, Başer, & Yavuz, 2000). However, it serves its purpose in private placement schools more. According to pre-service teachers of mentally retarded, placement schools and their classrooms substantially lack instructional materials (Bural, 2010). Çetin, Uludağ, and Akın (2007) also concluded that most placement schools in Turkey are not well-equipped enough with technology and instructional materials and for students with disabilities.

Not every student has an opportunity to use his or her own computer and to have access to the Internet. However, in Germany, there is a computer in each classroom of placement schools, but the Internet is accessed only in computer labs. There is a separate unit for material development that includes ready-made materials and periodicals as well. Placement schools in Germany are also well-equipped for the students with disabilities.

The research on characteristics of placement school classrooms identifies various weaknesses of school practice. First, pre-service early childhood teachers are mostly negative because classrooms are not available for early childhood education in placement schools (Yıldızlar, Kargı, & Ünal-Bozcan, 2011). Second, these classrooms are so crowded that practice teaching is hindered (Sılay & Gök, 2004). Furthermore, pre-service teachers do not find any opportunity to observe and practice teaching in different placement schools (Koroğlu, Başer, & Yavuz, 2000; Şahin, 2010).

In summary, the literature in the international context presents various perspectives with regard to the role of the characteristics of placement schools on pre-service teachers' professional development. The research in Turkey in this regard is quite limited. Since there are qualitatively big differences among schools in Turkey, the impact of field placement on pre-service teachers' professional development may present important implications for practice as well as rich perspectives as to the role of placement schools on pre-service teachers.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to gain insight into the pre-service teachers' perceptions of placement schools and how their perceptions influenced their professional growth. More specifically, the following research questions gave shape to this study: (1) How do the pre-service teachers perceive their placement school characteristics? (2) What kind of experiences do the pre-service teachers go through in better-served and underserved placement schools? (3) How do the pre-service teachers' perceptions of their placement school characteristics contribute to their professional development? (4) What recommendations do the pre-service teachers make regarding placement school selection and student placement?

Method

Research Design

We employed a qualitative phenomenological research design in this study to describe pre-service teachers' placement school experiences and analyze the meaning of learning in a certain school context. Phenomenology clarifies phenomena that we are aware of but cannot understand deeply (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Phenomenology allowed us to learn "how pre-service teachers perceived the phenomenon of "school placement," how they "describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Patton, 2002, p. 104) and how they experienced it (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Phenomenology mainly aims at understanding the underlying meaning of participants' lived or common experiences (Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

Participants

Participants were 24 pre-service primary school teachers who were seniors and studied at a public university in the 2012-2013 academic year. They had already taken the following courses: School

Experience and Practice Teaching I. Half of the participants were female (n=12). Their ages ranging from 20 to 24 was on average 22 (SD = .93), and cumulative grade point averages (M = 3.4, SD = .29) ranged from 2.7 to 3.9 out of 4.0. Only one of their course instructors was female and teaching in the Department of Primary Education. Other instructors (n=8) were teaching in various departments such as elementary mathematics education, elementary science education, social studies education, and Turkish language education due to the relatively small number of faculty in the Department of Primary Education.

Placement Schools

The placement schools (School A and School B) were labeled respectively as Type A school and Type B school according to the list of types of schools in Afyonkarahisar as of 2013 (Afyonkarahisar Provincial National Education Directorate, 2013a). The list published online includes different types of schools which are labelled according to the 16th article of the Regulation on Assignment and Relocation of School Administrators of the Ministry of National Education published in the Official Gazette No. 28728 dated 4 August 2013 with regard to some certain criteria published online such as the population of the place where the school is located, total number of students, teachers and other staff, type of instruction, number of classrooms, parts (i.e. conference hall, meeting room, indoor sports hall, computer lab, science lab, foreign language lab, art and music rooms, cafeteria and dining hall, medical room, school counseling office, library including over 1000 books) and conditions of school building, modern and contemporary facilities (i.e. the FATİH project, smartboards, telephones, fax machines, ADSL, copiers and printers), heating (i.e. stove, heater or air-conditioner), lodging, bussed education, revolving funds, national accreditation, school-business partnerships, and so on (Afyonkarahisar Provincial National Education Directorate, 2013b). Type A schools are as effective as Type B schools, but a greater amount of resources are used in Type A schools than in Type B schools (Ergen, 2013). In other words, School A (Type A school) is served better than School B (Type B school). The characteristics of School A and School B are described below.

Placement school A

School A, with 22 classrooms in a two story building, was situated in the city center. It was near a central avenue. It had a garden larger than 4000 m². There were three entry doors in the school. Natural gas was used to heat the school. The school provided a 4-Megabit Internet connection. Instruction was offered both in the morning and afternoon. There were about 27 students per teacher. The characteristics of mentor teachers of the participant pre-service primary school teachers sent to School A were as follows: All of them were male (n = 4) and had a Bachelor of Science degree. Their area of specialization was education.

Placement school B

School B was located in a two-story building with 10 classrooms. It was outside the city center; thereby one needed to take a bus to the school. School B provided a 1-Megabit connection to the Internet. It had a central heating system. The school provided full-day instruction. There were 20 students per teacher. The characteristics of mentor teachers of the participant pre-service primary school teachers sent to School B were as follows: Half of them were female (n = 4). Of all, only one had an associate degree. The remaining seven mentor teachers had a Bachelor of Science degree. Their area of specialization was commonly in the area of education (n = 6). However, there were two mentor teachers specialized in other areas (i.e. engineering and architecture education, technical education).

Data Collection Instruments

Through a semi-structured interview schedule including six main questions to uncover pre-service primary school teachers' perceptions of their placement schools and how their perceptions influence their professional growth, focus group interviews were carried out with four groups, each consisting of six pre-service primary school teachers. We had the draft interview schedule reviewed by five colleagues, two of whom were expert in curriculum and instruction, two of whom in classroom teaching, and one of whom was a faculty coordinator of field experience. Also, the draft interview schedule was sent to a colleague who was expert in the Turkish language. After some alterations made to the draft interview schedule, it was tested with a group of three pre-service primary school teachers. Almost all of them indicated that all questions were clear and that they did not have any difficulty in understanding. The pilot test helped us describe potential problems with the interview schedule and resolve those problems prior to the main study (Kvale, 2007). Hence, the interview schedule took its final form. The questions were posed for what they do in their placement schools (e.g., Could you tell me what you did in your placement school?); what they think about their field experiences (e.g., What do you think about practicing teaching in your placement school?), which placement school contributes too much to their professional growth (e.g., Do you think that practice teaching at your placement school teaches you more about teaching profession? Why?); how they define a better-served or an underserved school (e.g., What does a better-served or an underserved school stand for?); which placement school they would prefer (e.g., Which placement school would you prefer to practice teaching? Why?); which criteria should be considered when selecting placement schools (e.g., What should be considered when placement schools are designated? Why? Do you think that the criteria you mentioned are being considered? Why?); and their additional comments, questions or concerns.

Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative data were collected through focus group interviewing which is a quick, effective, and cheap method of data collection from a large group of participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000) and interaction among them (Marczak & Sewell, n.d.). The formation of each focus group was homogeneous, with six pre-service primary school teachers who shared similar background and experience (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Of four, two groups of six pre-service primary school teachers practiced teaching only in School A which was served better than School B only to which the remaining two groups of six pre-service primary school teachers were sent. In other words, pre-service primary school teachers practiced teaching only either in School A or School B. In each focus group, there were pre-service primary school teachers who were mentored by both the same and different primary school teachers in the same placement school. At the outset of each interview, all pre-service primary school teachers had been informed of the purpose of the study and its significance. Also, some procedural and ethical issues (i.e. anonymity of the interviewees and the data, consent for audio recording, approximate interview length, and so on) were covered. During each interview, each pre-service primary school teacher was called by his/her name. We were listening and waiting till each pre-service primary school teacher stopped talking. We were also open to receiving any new ideas expressed by the pre-service primary school teachers and followed them up. When some digressed too much from the topic, interviews were kindly interrupted to keep them on track. What was said earlier was kept in mind and connected with what was said later. We asked the pre-service primary school teachers to state other ideas, explanations, and recommendations to discuss what had yet not been discussed and we encouraged those who seemed to be skeptical of the group's views, to speak (Kumar, 1987). Pre-service primary school teachers who tended to dominate the discussions were given nonverbal cues to be stopped (Kumar, 1987). We sometimes asked the pre-service primary school teachers to assure whether what was understood by us

was what they meant. We also thanked every pre-service primary school teacher for their contribution to the study. Focus group interviews were conducted when they were available and where they were comfortable. The average interview took no longer than 30 minutes, and all interviews were audio-recorded.

Data Analysis

Content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002) was carried out to describe ‘core consistencies and meanings’ (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Through a word processing program, we transcribed all the interviews verbatim, and the content analysis of the interview data was done, following the inductive category development approach. In other words, no single predefined list of codes was developed and used, and analysis was performed after collection of the whole data. Initial codes were described and pulled together into more complicated units of analysis, namely themes to present the findings. Finally, the data yielded the following five themes: conceptions of placement school, placement school experiences; placement school characteristics; contributions of placement schools to professional growth; and suggestions for placement school selection and experience.

Trustworthiness

In this qualitative study, purposive sampling, expert review and thick descriptions were used to strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of the data in this study. Maximum variation sampling, as one of the purposeful sampling cases, allowed us to understand shared aspects or experiences of the phenomenon that emerged from great variation (Patton, 2002). Therefore, both better-servedness and underservedness were represented in selecting field schools. We had colleagues to review and offer their assessment of the draft interview schedule for content validity. Audiotaped interviews prevented any data loss as well. The data were described in detail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) so that the findings included enough thick description to make readers apply them to their own circumstances (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We also obtained rich, thick descriptions of the phenomenon studied, which herein is a placement school, from all focus group interviews.

Findings

The findings of the qualitative data generated the following five themes: conceptions of placement school, placement school characteristics, placement school experiences, contributions of placement schools to professional growth, and suggestions for placement school selection and experience.

Conceptions of Placement School

Pre-service primary school teachers sent both to School A and School B tended to define better-served placement school rather than underserved one. They perceived better-served placement school as a school providing everything. They referred “everything” to opportunities such as technology and materials.

However, according to all focus groups, “everything” was necessary, but not sufficient to characterize a school as better-served. It depended on the extent teachers made use of better-servedness. In other words, the more teachers benefitted from opportunities, the better-served a school was.

Placement School Characteristics

Pre-service primary school teachers' descriptions of the exterior and interior aspects of the schools indicated that the exterior appearance of the building of School A was modest and not appealing in terms of color and shape. One female pre-service primary school teacher said, "The exterior appearance of the school I went to last semester in the Practice Teaching I course was not too much artistic." (FG1). Concerning its interior, crowded classrooms were brought up. Other than these two aspects, School A was said to be a good learning environment with rich sets of instructional materials. Furthermore, the school used technology to support instruction such as photocopy machines, computers, and projectors. Although the school's financial profile was not a high one, such tools and materials were mentioned as important aids for the teachers and students.

Pertaining to the exterior of School B, the school building was stated to be small. One male pre-service primary school teacher said that it had yet two gardens. Pre-service primary school teachers sent to School B also described its interior. Its size was small. In other words, there were few students and teachers. It had few classrooms as well as few restrooms. It was not clean. It did not have a library, and materials were lacking. But, it had technological tools such as computers and projectors.

Another characteristic the pre-service primary school teachers mentioned was its location. School B was stated to be located in a poor and problematic neighborhood and was away from the city center. They also described its financial status as low and strengthened this by emphasizing its low-profile conditions and limited opportunities. They compared it to schools which are located in villages as follows: "It is like a school in a village." (FG4)

The pre-service primary school teachers also characterized both placement schools with people under their roofs. For example, School A was labeled with its top performing and respectful students and ambitious, academically successful, highly-qualified, well-communicated, interested, helpful, and respectful teachers. The pre-service primary school teachers sent to School B also described it with its disinterested administrator, teachers who were authoritarian, usually behavioristic, discriminating, violent, and disinterested and who did speak colloquially, did not lecture and assigned any homework to be done through the Internet search, did not use and know how to use technology effectively and who did their profession for money; students who did not have and read any books, did not know too much and who were not adapted; and unaware, disinterested and uninvolved parents with low socioeconomic status.

Placement School Experiences

Experiences the pre-service primary school teachers gained in placement schools were satisfying and dissatisfying in several aspects. The experiences that satisfied the pre-service primary school teachers were assisting mentor teachers in routine tasks and students in learning, and practicing teaching. Pre-service primary school teachers were satisfied with giving assistance to mentor teachers with some routines such as taking anthropometric measurements, namely height and weight measurements. A female pre-service primary school teacher in one of the focus groups indicated,

Lastly, we practiced teaching first graders. The mentor teacher was measuring and recording their height and weight. We did these measurements on our own. The mentor teacher left us with the classroom. We even [used] a computer... We calculated these. I prepared it to print from the printer. The mentor teacher printed it out. We then took notes according to those printouts. For example, the mentor teacher made us do this as well. (FG1)

As teaching assistants, they also helped students individually, especially who had special needs, with letter writing activities. One of male pre-service primary school teachers in the same focus group stated,

... Last year, we practiced teaching first graders in School A. Because of the recent system, there were 66-month-old children in the classroom. The mentor already had difficulty in classroom management. We assisted the mentor teacher with reading and writing activities..." (FG1)

Practicing teaching mostly in first-grade classrooms, pre-service primary school teachers often got involved in the teaching-learning process. To them, it was useful to learn to teach first graders because they stated that first grade was the most difficult elementary grade to teach.

Concerning practice teaching as one of satisfying placement school experiences, one female pre-service primary school teacher said, "In School B, mentor teachers tended mostly to leave pre-service teachers with teaching." (FG2). In another focus group, a female pre-service primary school teacher stated: "...But, in this semester, we are going to School B and most teachers ask us to teach. We are teaching. For us, it is not that big of a deal." (FG4).

Dissatisfying experiences of pre-service primary school teachers in placement schools included (a) assisting assessment, (b) limited or no development of teacher knowledge, (c) reflection, and (d) mentoring. To them, it was difficult to assist mentor teachers with both traditional and complementary assessment. They had difficulty in grading exams and projects and observing the academic performance of students. A female pre-service primary school teacher said, "For example, I had difficulty in grading projects the mentor teacher assigned to students." (FG1).

Pre-service primary school teachers had limited or no opportunity to develop teacher knowledge. They had no opportunity to gain practical knowledge because they stated that they did not have a chance to assist the teacher or teach a class. As a result, they did not get involved in the teaching-learning process. A male pre-service primary school teacher indicated,

To me, the School Experience course is not very different from the Practice Teaching I course. In other words, what we have been doing for two years is the same in general. All in all, we made observations most of the time. (FG3)

One female pre-service primary school teacher in the same focus group said, "We did the same things again. ... All were the same. We did not do anything additionally. There was nothing which involved us." (FG3). One female pre-service primary school teacher in another focus group stated, "We were observing. We were writing reflection papers. What we did was limited with these. [We did not teach] too much." (FG4)

They also lacked knowledge of students. One female pre-service primary school teacher said, "... We do not get to know students at all. We do not get to learn their characteristics. We do not learn about their problems. ... We are just given a book to teach..." (FG2). Moreover, they had no opportunity to develop their pedagogical knowledge. They especially had trouble with putting theory (i.e. constructivism) into practice due to mentor teachers' anxiety about curriculum time. One female pre-service primary school teacher said,

I think practice teaching with first graders should be more enjoyable. Students are really bored of cut and paste activities. We think there should be something enjoyable, but the mentor teacher, as a robot, said, 'No, finishes it!'. The mentor teacher gave us an opportunity once. We were trying to entertain or involve students in the lesson. The mentor teacher said, 'OK. That is enough! Finish it right now!' (FG3).

Pre-service primary school teachers had also no opportunity to develop their knowledge of different educational contexts. Pre-service primary school teachers did not gain any experience in schools in villages and with multi-grade classrooms. They practiced teaching the same grade level and in the same placement school again. One female pre-service teacher said, “[It would be better to graduate after practicing teaching in] schools with multi-grade classrooms.” (FG3). She also added, “Up to now, we had been in a better-served placement school. ... For example, how do students receive education in schools which are located in villages and with multi-grade classrooms? We did not observe this.” (FG3).

One female pre-service primary school teacher stated, “... it will make sense unless the faculty simply sends pre-service teachers to placement schools to which pre-service teachers were sent before.” (FG2). Another female pre-service primary school teacher in the same focus group also mentioned, “When we learned to go to School B for the second time, we went there asking, 'Again?'. We will not see something different. We have already recognized even students because the [field placement] school is small.” (FG2).

Another female pre-service primary school teacher also said, “The mistake made by our faculty is that it sends pre-service teachers to the same placement school every semester.” (FG2).

Pre-service primary school teachers were also dissatisfied with reflection. Although they wrote upon their placement school experiences, as a requirement of the Practice Teaching I course, following the course outline or syllabus, they stated that they did not benefit from that experience.

The last dissatisfying experience of pre-service primary school teachers was mentoring. They did not observe and gain experience with good role model mentor teachers. One female pre-service primary school teacher said,

Teachers should be cautiously selected. ... They should be good role models. Rather than bad role models, it is important to select good role models. ... If our mentor teacher were a good role model, we would have modeled them, thinking of teaching our students in the same way our mentor teacher does. Pre-service teachers should follow the model of mentor teachers. (FG3)

They also practiced teaching, being physically isolated, i.e. without being observed by mentor teachers. Thus, they did not learn more from such mentor teachers. One female pre-service primary school teacher said, “For example, this year, our mentor teacher said as follows: ‘You are going to teach. What will I do? Then, let me go.’ These things should not happen.” (FG1)

Contributions of Placement Schools to Professional Growth

How placement school contributes to professional development of pre-service primary school teachers was reflected through three perspectives:

Only underserved placement schools contribute to professional growth

The pre-service primary school teachers stated that only underserved placement schools contributed to their professional development. But, their experiences in School B, which is underserved, had both benefits and challenges. One great advantage was that School B helped pre-service primary school teachers gain real-world professional experience because it reflects the reality. The pre-service primary school teachers found practice teaching in School B beneficial because it is similar to those schools located in the East of Turkey and in villages and had multi-grade classrooms. In this school, they

learned what to do in such schools in the future. They were aware of characteristics of schools to which they would be assigned. They were aware of future working conditions. They were aware of the reality of Turkey. Correspondingly, one male pre-service primary school teacher even described practice teaching in a better-served placement school as “ignoring the reality of Turkey.” (FG1). It is believed that achieving in bad conditions is difficult for the ones who face good conditions. According to another male pre-service primary school teacher, “what is important is teaching well in bad conditions, and this is possible through experience.” (FG4). For this reason, pre-service primary school teachers found practice teaching in underserved and low-quality placement schools more beneficial to their professional development. To illustrate, one female pre-service primary school teacher said, “It was better for me to practice [teaching] in a school with bad conditions because we are at the start of our professional lives. I was able to see.” (FG2). Another female pre-service primary school teacher in another focus group stated,

... Students may not be so good, but it is better for us to meet them because we will be assigned to schools in the East of Turkey. In other words, it is better for us to meet people with low levels of education. We will teach them. There are limited opportunities in the East of Turkey. The conditions are bad. Therefore, communicating with them makes sense to me. In other words, we speak their language. We should face the reality directly. ... Because one who faces bad conditions exactly achieves in good conditions, but it is difficult for one who faces good conditions to achieve in bad conditions. For this reason, it is better for us to practice teaching in underserved and low-quality schools. (FG4)

Otherwise, as one female pre-service primary school teacher stated, they would be surprised, shocked and even afraid. She mentioned,

... It would be better for us to see different schools earlier such as those which are located in villages since schools to which we will be assigned will not be inner-city ones. ... Because we are surprised and shocked. After seeing there (a better-served placement school), School B is weird to us. In other words, I was a bit afraid on the first day I went there although its status was not that bad. We saw differently. I was not afraid of the profession, but I got afraid of its neighborhood. It was in a different place. (FG3)

One disadvantage of an underserved placement school was that some course activities did not fully serve their purposes. For example, pre-service primary school teachers were responsible with taking a look at the library as a requirement of the Practice Teaching I course. But, as stated by one female pre-service primary school teacher, this activity did not serve its purpose because School B did not have any library (FG2). Another disadvantage of an underserved placement school was that pre-service primary school teachers lacked the experience of teaching through materials. They did not find any opportunity to use classroom materials for students during their practice teaching. However, teaching through materials depends on the pre-service teacher. For example, one female pre-service primary school teacher stated that she designed her own material to use during her practice and that one could teach well without the use of technology (FG1).

Both better-served and underserved placement schools contribute to professional growth

Pre-service primary school teachers especially those sent to School B also stated that both better-served and underserved placement schools contributed to their professional development. In both placement schools, pre-service primary school teachers learned to teach in every condition because they did not know what the future holds, and they were not sure of the characteristics of schools, to which they would be assigned. They were anxious about the future. From practice teaching in better-served placement schools, they also learned how to offer opportunities for underserved placement schools. They also became motivated to learn. They improved their knowledge by learning different things. Accordingly, one female pre-service primary school teacher said,

To me, not only one type of placement school [will be beneficial to us]. Seeing both better-served and underserved placement schools will be beneficial to us. In an underserved placement school, we faced challenges we will probably face in the future. In a better-served school, I wish we had seen more than what we do so that we are able to do more in a school with limited opportunities. For example, in the most underserved placement school, we may also discourage ourselves. We should be in a better-served placement school so that we develop ourselves and learn different methods and things. We should be a more effective teacher rather than a discouraged one when we will be assigned to a school. (FG2)

Good mentor teachers contribute to professional growth

Pre-service primary school teachers also stated that good mentor teachers rather than placement schools contributed to their professional development. Their learning to teach depended on good mentor teachers. They stated that they learned professionalism from their observations of good mentor teachers. They also learned if they were valued by mentor teachers. Therefore, good mentor teachers should be selected. One male pre-service primary school teacher indicated, “To me, teachers who are good at their profession should be selected. ... Rather than schools, teachers should be determined. ... Students should be sent to mentor teachers, but not to schools.” (FG3).

The pre-service primary school teachers also identified who a good mentor teacher is. Good mentor teachers were defined as equipped, self-confident, qualified, and productive teachers. Accordingly, one female pre-service primary school teacher indicated,

For example, mentor teachers should be self-confident so that they do not feel tested [while we are observing them in the classroom]. They are aware of the fact that we are there to learn from them. They will not feel nervous in the classroom. ... They should be closer to us. ... They should trust in themselves. Mentor teachers who are not self-confident manifest themselves. (FG1)

Another female pre-service primary school teacher in the same focus group said, “We need qualified teachers more than schools in order for us to learn from them.” (FG1). The pre-service primary school teachers, however, did not reach any consensus on how those mentor teachers should be selected. To some pre-service primary school teachers, it is a mystery. To some, parents of placement school students should be asked to select those mentor teachers because parents more or less know which teacher is effective or ineffective from their children. Some suggested that primary school supervisors should observe and select mentor teachers or they should be selected through the results of studies on this issue.

Suggestions for Placement School Selection and Experience

The pre-service primary school teachers also made some suggestions for both placement school selection and experience.

Suggestions for placement school selection

Who should select placement schools were reflected through two perspectives: On the one hand, the pre-service primary school teachers undertook responsibility for selecting placement schools. Correspondingly, it was indicated that pre-service primary school teachers should select placement schools from a pre-determined list in a survey. To illustrate, one female pre-service primary school teacher said, “It would be better for us if [we selected placement schools] through a survey administered to us.” (FG1). On the other hand, the pre-service primary school teachers argued that this was the responsibility of faculties and said that faculties should select placement schools reflecting the reality such as schools in villages and with multi-grade classrooms. The pre-service primary school

teachers who advocated that mentor teachers rather than placement schools should be selected also determined some criteria for selecting those teachers. Accordingly, it can be stated that mentor teachers should be self-confident and qualified so that pre-service primary school teachers can learn from them.

Suggestions for placement school experience

Suggestions made for placement school experience covered its different aspects. Considering placement school experience in the primary school teacher education program, the pre-service primary school teachers stated that the School Experience course should be practice-based as well. They also said that they should be more involved in the teaching-learning process. They were looking forward to teaching as early as possible. A few number of pre-service primary school teachers should practice teaching in the same placement school classroom. Otherwise, placement school students were stated to suffer from lack of enough space. For example, a female pre-service primary school teacher said that even three students had to sit at the same two-student desk (FG2). Pre-service primary school teachers should practice teaching with students at younger ages because it was stated to be effective in the long run. The pre-service primary school teachers also mentioned the importance of communication. They stated that pre-service primary school teachers, teacher educators, and mentor teachers should communicate with each other for better coordination of practice teaching activities. Accordingly, the following was indicated, "... If pre-service primary school teachers, teacher educators, and mentor teachers communicated with each other, I would understand that what we have done in the placement school and faculty and our reflections on practice teaching [have a purpose]." (FG4)

Considering assessment of field experience, pre-service primary school teachers stated that university instructors should take interest in, observe, and monitor them. University instructors were stated to leave pre-service primary school teachers unattended during their practice teaching. From her own words, one female pre-service primary school teacher said, "... For example, our university instructor never comes to school. Except for our first day in school. That shows our instructor does not take interest in us but expects a lot from us." (FG2)

Discussion and Conclusion

This study with a purpose of uncovering pre-service teachers' perceptions of placement schools and how their experiences gained there influence their professional growth generated five related themes: conceptions of placement school, placement school characteristics, placement school experiences, contributions of placement schools to professional growth, and suggestions for placement school selection and experience.

The pre-service primary school teachers sent to each placement school had a tendency toward defining the meaning of a better-served placement school. They might perceive that schools in which they had gained experience were better-served. They equated its meaning with resource richness or abundance. They qualified better-served placement school as a school full of resources, i.e. technology and materials. Borg, Borg, and Stranahan (2012) also defined a low-poverty school environment as a resource abundant school and characterized students in high-poverty schools as those having few resources to use in their schools. Correspondingly, the pre-service primary school teachers sent to School B compared it to the schools located in villages (FG4). However, resource richness is necessary but not sufficient to characterize a school as a better-served one. It depends on the extent teachers make use of resources. In other words, the more teachers use resources, the better-served a school is. This relationship brings good teachers to our minds. According to Truscott and Truscott (2005), high-need

or underserved schools must find and keep good teachers despite poor working conditions described with inadequate resources, large class sizes, and lower salaries. However, this study revealed that teachers in better-served or resource-rich schools should also be good teachers who are able to make use of resources.

The pre-service primary school teachers' descriptions of placement school characteristics were consistent with their understandings of better service for their professional development needs, namely, resource richness or abundance. They also characterized both placement schools with people under their roofs. Their descriptions especially of teachers and students in School A complied with some characteristics of an effective teacher (Walker, 2013) and of an effective learner (Kasapoğlu, 2014). However, the described characteristics of teachers and students in School B contradicted with the aforementioned literature.

Satisfying placement school experiences were assisting routine tasks, learning, and practice teaching. On the otherhand, dissatisfying placement school experiences were helpful in assisting teachers with assessment but at the same time were limited in the development of their knowledge, reflection, and the contributions from their mentors. As can be understood from dissatisfying placement school experiences, the pre-service primary school teachers assigned to the School B seemed to encounter dissonance between their beliefs and experiences. It was seen that most of their presumptions of practice teaching and mentoring conflicted with their school experiences. For example, one female pre-service primary school teacher stated that they could not find enough opportunity to apply what they learned due to mentor teacher's anxiety about curriculum time (FG3). This might be due to their lack of teacher knowledge including knowledge of curriculum, practice, pedagogy, learners, and educational contexts (Shulman, 1987). This dissonance would even develop new sets of beliefs and be adopted and used as a guide for their further teaching (Eisenhardt, Besnoy, & Steele, 2012). The pre-service primary school teachers were also not satisfied with reflection and mentoring. They might have difficulty in reflecting upon their placement school experiences because of not being mentored. The reason is that mentees can reflect upon their own practices if mentors (or probably teacher educators) model reflective practices and facilitate opportunities for their reflections (Sempowicz & Hudson, 2012). In the current study, the pre-service primary school teachers even stated that they were physically isolated. For example, one female pre-service primary school teacher said that their mentor teacher went out from the classroom when they started teaching (FG1). As a result of his study, Kasapoğlu (2015) concluded that one of the main drawbacks encountered during school experience and practice teaching was the lack of effective mentoring. Effective mentoring is significantly and positively correlated with pre-service teachers' sense of efficacy (Moulding, Stewart, & Dunmeyer, 2014) which increases across the practice teaching regardless of being sent to (sub)urban schools (Knoblauch & Hoy, 2008).

The pre-service primary school teachers had mixed perceptions about the contributions of placement schools to professional growth. Some advocated that both types of (and only underserved) placement schools contributed to their professional development while some emphasized the significance of mentoring in their professional growth. For example, one male pre-service primary school teacher even equated practice teaching in a better-served placement school with "ignoring the reality of Turkey." (FG1). Furthermore, one female pre-service primary school teacher said that practice teaching in both schools would be beneficial in terms of teaching them how to offer opportunities they observed in better-served schools for underserved ones and to be professional (FG2). On the other hand, one male pre-service primary school teacher indicated that they should be sent to mentor teachers rather than schools (FG3). One female pre-service primary school teacher also said that they needed qualified

mentor teachers more than schools to learn (FG1). In other words, good mentor teachers rather than placement schools were stated to contribute to their learning to teach. The setting which is one of the quality characteristics of professional preparation may not be the most important factor in some cases (Ronfeldt, 2012; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012). Rather, the ability of the mentor teacher in the classroom where pre-service teachers learn does the matter (Grossman, Ronfeldt, & Cohen, 2012) because experiences of pre-service teachers can differ within the same school considerably (Ronfeldt, 2012). For instance, a designated mentor teacher may be better than his/her next door colleague (Ronfeldt, 2012). Considering the fact that teacher education programs do not check out characteristics of placement schools (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009), it can be strongly recommended that good mentor teachers should be described and selected regardless of whether a placement school is better-served or underserved. The pre-service primary school teachers also identified who a good mentor teacher is. Good mentor teachers were defined as equipped, self-confident, qualified, and productive teachers also dedicated to teaching. Nevertheless, the pre-service primary school teachers did not reach any consensus on how those mentor teachers should be selected and who should select those mentor teachers. Regarding the fact that mentor teachers are not quiet committed to roles they play and there are no predefined mentor teacher selection criteria (Aytaç, 2010), some implications are made for further research and practice. Although the pre-service primary school teachers determined some criteria for selecting mentor teachers such as self-confidence, quality, and so on, a research-based rubric including more concrete indicators of “good” mentoring practices, should be developed and used to select mentor teachers. Because they are able to do so (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Ronfeldt, & Wyckoff, 2011), schools might be given an opportunity to identify and hire teachers of top quality whose students show higher growth in achievement and who are less likely to apply for a transfer. Building a reputation as a good teacher is one of the most significant criteria for mentor teacher selection (Mullinix, 2002). Some of the criteria for selection are “a clearly articulated vision of teaching and learning, knowledge of content, accomplished curriculum developer, professional interests, and compatible personalities” (Mullinix, 2002, p.8). To this end, a pool of prospective mentor teachers, as suggested by Ganser (1995), might be established through gathering and reviewing some information sources requested from prospective mentors such as nomination letters (preferably of former pre-service teachers); letters of intent for teaching, induction, mentoring, and so on; curriculum vitae; portfolios; video records of lessons; and interviews.

Although the effect of quality of student teaching is greater when it is shorter (Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012), pre-service primary school teachers might receive increased amounts of experience of student teaching which lead to better rates of teacher retention (Huling, 1998). In fact, pre-service teachers have fewer opportunities to engage in approximations of interactive practice (e.g. practices which teach pre-service teachers how to lead a discussion or answer to questions that students ask) than novice clinical psychologists do (Grossman, Compton, Igra, Ronfeldt, Shahan, & Williamson, 2009). In their first year, they should also be provided with induction support (i.e. asking for support from school administrators, being mentored, attending seminars for new teachers, finding time to collaborate with same-subject teachers on planning, being assisted by teacher aides, having flexible work schedule) which is a significant predictor of less teacher migration and attrition (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017) and has a positive impact on their students’ achievement (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Great attention should yet be paid to sending a few number of pre-service primary school teachers to the same placement school classroom. The reason is that three primary school students had to sit at the same two-student desk when many of pre-service primary school teachers were there according to one female participant (FG2).

There should be a healthy triangle among teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and mentor teachers. Teacher educators should not leave pre-service teachers unattended during practice teaching. One female pre-service primary school teacher said that their instructor came to the placement school only on their first day (FG2). Mentor teachers should not physically isolate pre-service teachers. Otherwise, they cannot fulfill their supervisory responsibilities which are mostly undertaken by younger or less experienced mentor teachers (Kiraz & Yildirim, 2007), and pre-service teachers cannot cross the chasm between theory and practice and develop a professional self (Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008).

This phenomenological study focused on the meaning pre-service primary school teachers attached to the phenomenon “school placement”. To gain deeper insight into the perceptions of pre-service primary school teachers about the contribution of placement schools to their professional growth, case studies might be further conducted including the analysis of the data coming from observations and documents as well. This exploratory study might also be the initial qualitative phase of sequenced mixed methods research which will form a sound basis for the next quantitative explanatory sequence of research in which a scale measuring pre-service primary school teachers’ perceptions of the contribution of placement schools to their professional growth will be developed and validated with larger samples.

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