

## Student Teachers' Perspectives on Teaching Profession out of a Multigrade Classroom Site Visitation\*

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**Abstract:** Multigrade classrooms, places where students of different grades are taught together, have been used throughout the world for two main purposes: to solve the problems of uneven student enrolment as well as the insufficient number of teachers and to provide the disadvantaged and remote areas with education. In the case of Turkey, student teachers need to gain the earliest possible awareness of a real education setting, specifically the reality of multigrade classrooms. Village schools visited in this study are the schools affiliated with one of the provinces, which was within the scope of TUBITAK Evrena 1010 Project, entitled as "Role of Immigration on Student Engagement: Influence of Social, Cultural, Psychological Factors and Social Capital" (112 K 600). The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which "a multigrade classroom experience in a village school" contributes to student teachers' attitudes towards teaching and being a teacher. The research was conducted as a case study among qualitative research methods. The data was drawn from the reflections reported by 109 student teachers in İstanbul and analyzed by means of content analysis. This project revealed two main themes: (i) Student Teachers' Perceptions of the Constraints/Barriers Encountered by Teachers and (ii) Student Teachers' Attitudes Towards Being a Teacher. This site visitation is expected to raise awareness of the student teachers to make a change in the lives of pupils and school administrators.

*Keywords:* Student teachers, higher education, multigrade class, village school, reflection.

### Öğretmen Adaylarının Birleştirilmiş Sınıf Ziyareti Sonrasında Öğretmenlik Mesleğine İlişkin Görüşleri

**Öz:** Farklı sınıflardan öğrencilerin bir arada eğitim gördüğü birleştirilmiş sınıf uygulamasının tüm dünyada kullanılması başlıca iki amaca dayanmaktadır. Bunlar, okula kaydolan öğrenci sayısındaki dengesizliğe olduğu kadar öğretmen sayısındaki yetersizliğe de çözüm getirmek ve merkezden uzak dezavantajlı bölgelerin de eğitimden faydalanmasını sağlamaktır. Türkiye özelinde, öğretmen adaylarının gerçek bir eğitim ortamının, özellikle birleştirilmiş sınıflar gerçeğinin, farkına varması mümkün olan en kısa zamanda sağlanmalıdır. Bu çalışmada ziyaret edilen köy okulları "Öğrenci Katılımında Göçün Rolü: Sosyal, Kültürel, Psikolojik Faktörlerin ve Sosyal Sermayenin Etkisi" (112 K 600) başlıklı TUBITAK Evrena 1010 projesinin kapsamında olan ilçelerden birinde yer almaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı "bir köy okulundaki birleştirilmiş sınıf deneyiminin" öğretmen adaylarının öğretmeye ve öğretmen olmaya dair algılarına nasıl katkı yaptığını incelemektir. Çalışmada nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden "Bütüncül Tek Durum Deseni" kullanılmıştır. İstanbul'da öğrenim gören 109 öğretmen adayının yansıtma raporlarından elde edilen veriler içerik analizi yoluyla incelenmiştir. Bu proje ortaya iki ana tema çıkarmıştır: (i) Öğretmen Adaylarının Algılarına Göre Öğretmenlerin Karşılaştığı Sınırlamalar/ Engeller ve (ii) Öğretmen Adaylarının Öğretmen Olmaya Dair Bakış Açıkları. Bu alan deneyiminin, öğretmen adaylarına öğrencilerin ve okul idarecilerinin hayatlarında bir fark yaratma konusunda farkındalık kazandırması beklenmektedir.

*Anahtar Sözcükler:* Öğretmen adayları, yükseköğretim, birleştirilmiş sınıflar, köy okulu, yansıtma

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Like in many countries, education has always been in the center of arguments in Turkey. Since the ones who play one of the most active roles in the education process are teachers themselves, it is of great importance to focus on the ways education faculties train their student teachers. It has long been suggested that once graduated, new teachers find it really hard to relate the theoretical facts they are taught during the courses with real life challenges they immediately face in education settings. This, in part, might result from the fact that there are only two courses which help student teachers gain field experience during their undergraduate university education. Given that these courses are in the last two semesters, it can be argued that student teachers go through their first three years without the awareness of what an actual classroom looks like in real settings, what kind of hardships they might encounter both in and out of it, how it feels like to interact with a group of youngsters, and even the extent to which parents are involved in the education of their children.

According to Allen and Wright (2014), although there is an implicit assumption that the knowledge and practices taught within pre-service programs will enable professional practice in the workplace, a widely discerned problem lies in the fact that there is often a huge disparity between the types of skills and knowledge taught in pre-service programs and the realities of workplace practice. As Barone et.al. (1996) state, many countries have been trying to ensure an increase in the number of courses that will make it possible for student teachers to observe and experience real teaching practices more closely. Similarly, Clark (2003) believes that the culture of teacher education has been distorted by over-emphasis on standards, testing and accountability, by “the subject-matter-knowledge-is-everything” position, and by the myth that policy enforcement from the center is the one cure for all the ills of education. This has also been a high stakes issue in Turkey since student teachers are required to take centralized exams to be placed in public schools as teachers after graduation. Based on the aforementioned perspective that puts great value on the necessity of more and earlier real life experience of future teachers, it is meaningful to introduce them to some common practices within their country’s cultural and educational settings. One of these common practices in Turkey is “multigrade classes,” which is sometimes referred to as “multigrade classes”. Throughout the world, multigrade classes are used specifically for three reasons: uneven student enrolment, an insufficient number of teachers, and to provide an economic solution for providing the disadvantaged and remote areas with education (Beukes, 2006). A few examples may illustrate the numerical significance of the “multigrade classrooms” reality in various countries:

In Australia in 1988, 40% of schools in the Northern Territories had multigrade classes. In England in 2000, 25.4% of all classes in primary education were classified as ‘mixed year’, which means that two or more curriculum grades were being taught by one teacher; 25% of all learners were studying in mixed year classes. In India in 1996, 84% of primary schools had 3 teachers or fewer. Since primary schools have 5 curriculum grades, this means that if learners are to be ‘on task’ for most of the prescribed school day, then some teachers must be responsible for two or more grades for some part of each day. In Nepal in 1998, the teacher-

primary school ratio was 3.8. Primary schools comprised 5 grades. If learners are 'on task' for most of the prescribed school day, it follows that most teachers must be responsible for two or more grades for some part of each day. In Northern Ireland in 2002, 21.6% of all classes (years 1-7) were 'composite' classes (i.e. two or more grades taught together). In Peru in 1998, 78% of all public primary schools were multigrade. Forty-one of multigrade schools had only one teacher; 59% more than one. 89.2% of all public primary schools in rural areas were multigrade, of which 42% had only one teacher and 58% more than one. In Sri Lanka in 1999, 63% of all public schools had 4 or fewer teachers. Some are primary schools with 5 grades and some are primary and post-primary with up to 11 grades. If learners are 'on task' for most of the prescribed school day, it follows that some teachers must be responsible for classes spanning two or more grades for some part of each day (Little, 2005).

In Turkey's case, the reasons are not significantly different from the rest of the world. The plan to spread primary education in the countryside, the country's geographic structure, the remoteness of some settlements and difficulty of travelling to these sites, the physical problems in school buildings, and the lack of teachers are among the reasons why multigrade classes became a necessity (Doğan, 2000).

As Little (2005) notes, a UNESCO/APEID study carried out in 1989 collected data concerning the benefits of multigrade teaching from educators in twelve countries in the Asia and Pacific Region. These included: Learners develop self-study skills

- Learners cooperate across age groups, resulting in collective ethics, concern and responsibility
- Learners help each other
- Teachers can organize both remediation and enrichment activities for low and high achievers, respectively, more discreetly than in single grade classes

However, there are also drawbacks to the practice of multigrade classes. One of the difficulties encountered by teachers of the multigrade class is that a teacher has to teach two different lessons to the two different age groups simultaneously, which consequently causes heavy workload, extra preparation time as well as difficulty in classroom management since the teacher has to prepare two different curricula for group instruction (Mason and Burns, 1996). Other disadvantages could be listed as follows (Little, 2005):

- The difficulty of teaching vacancies in multigrade schools in rural areas
- The absence of teacher accountability in remote multigrade schools
- Lack of financial incentives for teachers to teach in remote multigrade schools
- Inadequate provision for housing, employment for spouses and children's education for teachers
- Absence of promotion incentives
- Restricted opportunities for in-service training

Apart from the pros and cons of multigrade classes, it is of great importance to give preservice teachers the opportunity to visit such classes and elicit their perceptions on this experience. One study carried out by Seban (2015) on the perceptions of pre-service

elementary teachers on multigrade schools experience reveals that the results of the reflective responses of the students indicated a positive change in teachers' willingness to engage in the profession. The writer suggests that both the reflective practice and the distinctiveness of the multigrade context, for the majority of the student teachers, produced opportunities for disrupting or asking new questions about who a teacher is and what it means to be a teacher. These experiences helped students to recognise new institutional roles and modify their expectations, as well as creating positive attitudes towards multigrade schooling and the realities of rural life. The students appeared to have become comfortable with the idea of working in multigrade classrooms through the process of thinking about what kind of teachers they will be or want to become.

Adjunct literature on multigrade classrooms reported the challenges encountered by teachers and administrators (Fidan ve Baykul, 1987; Dursun, 2006; Doğan, 2000; Erdem, 2008; Koksall, 2010). Berry (2001) noted that the practice of multigrade class is inevitable in developing countries and it could be used as a means to overcome the constraints experienced with regards to the limited number of classes and teachers in village schools located in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Scholarship on multigrade classrooms also reported the positive influences seen on students as well as teachers in terms of group work, problem solving and collaboration (Little, 1994; 2001; Hargreaves, 2001; Erdem, 2008; Yildiz ve Koksall, 2009; Koksall, 2010). As it could be seen from the related scholarship there is scarcity of empirical evidence on the perceptions of student teachers about multigrade classrooms and the ways in which such an experience could have an impact on their perceptions of being a teacher.

As for the current study, the idea is to enable student teachers to gain the earliest possible awareness of a real education setting and a social reality. Through the interaction both with the students and the teachers, they are expected to reflect on what they have experienced so that they can internalize their feelings on their way to becoming successful teachers. It is for this reason that this study is expected to bring unique insights for the scholarship of teacher education.

As the primary investigator and the trainers of TUBITAK Evrena Project, which aimed to investigate the role of immigration on student integration and success, we wanted to conduct follow up projects based on site visitations in the areas of research in Istanbul. Village schools visited in this study are the schools affiliated with one of the provinces, which was within the scope of the mentioned project. This site visitation is expected to raise awareness of the student teachers to make a change in the lives of pupils and school administrators.

### **Method**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which "multigrade classroom experience in a village school" contributes to student teachers' attitudes towards teaching and being a teacher. This study also tries to find out the degree of awareness of student

teachers on the implications of educational issues in Turkey. As a result, the research questions for this study were designed as follows:

### Research Questions

- What are student teachers' perceptions of the kinds of constraints and barriers that are encountered by teachers in multigrade classrooms in a village school?
- In what ways did visiting a multigrade village classroom contribute to student teachers' attitudes towards being a teacher?

Conducted within the frame of "community service practices" within the Education Faculty, this qualitative longitudinal study has been in progress for two years. Student teachers have been informed about the process of site visits and its value in earlier meetings. Faculty members who are actively involved in this process share our views about the schools, students and the neighborhood in general.

Student teachers were also asked to write reflections for several open ended questions prepared by the researchers before the visit. They were asked to reflect on the following questions:

- In what ways multigrade classroom site visitation revealed your perspective on teaching profession?
- What are the constraints and barriers you have observed in multigrade school settings in a village classroom?
- Do you intend to be a teacher in a multigrade class in a village after this experience? In what ways does this experience affect you both personally and professionally?

### Integrative Case Study Design

The research was conducted as a case study among qualitative research methods. An integrative single case design was applied for the research. The integrative single case design is appropriate for specific, exceptional, excessive/marginal situation and the situations away from general standards (Yildirim and Simsek, 2016). According to Ministry of National Education (MONE) data there were 159085 students in 1995-1996 academic year (Erden, 1996) and 150.309 students in 2013- 2014 (Yıldırım et. al., 2016) had been taught in multigrade classroom. Regarding the high number of pupils in elementary schools, multigrade classroom has been considered as an exceptional case in Turkish educational system.

Merriam (1998) defines the concept of case "as a thing, a singly entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" and conceptualizes qualitative case study "as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (p. xiii). Therefore the case used in this study was the multigrade class in a village school "as a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (Miles and Huberman, 1998, p. 27). Student teachers were expected to

make observations, interact with the teachers and students and report their reflections based on these experiences within that case of multigrade classroom.

The design of case study was categorized under the following four types by Yin (2002): “Single holistic design, single embedded design, multiple holistic design and multiple embedded design”. The design of this case study aligns with the “holistic design”, which requires one unit of analysis of multigrade classrooms. By using Yin (2002), as a reference, authors selected this design, which enabled them with the maximum instrumentality to answer the ways in which visiting a multigrade village classroom contributed to student teachers’ attitudes towards being a teacher as well as their perceptions of the kinds of constraints and barriers experienced in multigrade classrooms in a village school. The researchers considered the strengths and limitations of this design and took careful steps to avoid the certain drawbacks while implementing each of the phases during the project (Yazan, 2015).

By using Yin (2002) as a reference, the researchers asked student teachers to use the following evidentiary sources from the case they were asked to visit and interact: “Documentation, interviews, direct observations, participant observation and physical artifacts” (p. 96).

### **Participants**

Student teachers comprise the participants in the study. We use the term *student teachers* to refer to undergraduate junior students who have been studying in the departments of “Counseling and Psychological Guidance, Early Childhood Education, and English Language Teaching” at a foundation university in Istanbul, Turkey. The Project group is comprised of:

- 50 junior students who joined the project in the 2014-2015 academic year (Counseling and Psychological Guidance)
- 50 junior students who joined the project in the 2014-2015 academic year (Early Childhood Education)
- 22 junior students who joined the project in the 2014-2015 academic year (English Language Teaching)
- One research assistant who joined the project as a supervisor.

As for the valid data of the research, 109 student teachers from the departments of English Language Teaching, Counseling and Psychological Guidance and Early Childhood Education participated in this study. Student teachers were asked to share their experiences in reflection papers and keep their photos and videos they took during their school visit as a means of documentation.

## **Context**

The analysis unit is three multigrade classrooms in İstanbul province. These classrooms were in the primary schools in which three villages schools are approximately 4 km. apart from each other. We selected three schools for this study (which we call School A, School B and School C). All schools are located in one of the most rural areas of the Istanbul province, in an area with many migrants from various parts of Turkey. The area is disadvantaged in terms of distance, transportation infrastructural facilities and socio economic status. What is interesting about these villages is that only a few kilometers away is a fast-developing neighborhood with luxury homes, restaurants and private schools. We planned to conduct the social responsibility project at this specific neighborhood to enable our students to compare the lives in these two extremes and to become aware of the contrasting realities of life. What also makes these schools distinct from other schools is that they have multigrade classes, where students from different grades are placed in the same classroom. This is something most of our student teachers were not familiar with, so it turned out to be a good idea to choose such a setting with a view to raising their awareness of how things work beyond the theories taught to them at university.

## **Procedure**

This study is based on the following case study steps: (1) developing research questions, (2) developing research sub-problem, (3) determining analysis unit, (4) determining the case, (5) selecting the participants, (6) collecting data and making connection with the sub-problem, (7) data analysis and interpretation and (8) reporting the case study (Yildirim and Simsek, 2016). The project was practice-oriented, whereby student teachers were expected to offer trainings for the pupils studying in these disadvantaged neighborhoods as well as having conversations with the students, teachers and administrators within the school they visited. Though it was only a one-day visit, it was full of activities including interactions before and afterwards. Phases of the project are indicated below.

## **Phases of the social responsibility project.**

*Phase 1:* The dean of the Faculty of Education sent a letter to the Educational Directorate of Istanbul Province asking for permission to conduct the visit and the project. Researchers assured the Ministry that all the rights of the student teachers and the pupils involved in the project would be carefully protected.

*Phase 2:* The project was conducted in May 2015 and lasted for 4 weeks, including trainings for student teachers before school visits and group discussions after visits. During this period the dean and the faculty members visited schools and held interviews with the principals and teachers about the nature of the visits to these three schools. In the first week, students were informed about the school visits and were asked to plan some activities for the pupils in these schools.

*Phase 3: Site experience:* Student teachers visited the schools and offered educational activities for the pupils. Students were assigned to some activity groups (such as outdoor activities, paperwork activities, play dough activities, mental play activities, art craft, library, etc.). In the second week, students were taken to 3 distinct village schools. They were ready to perform the activities with the pupils in the village schools. The faculty students and the village school students spent nearly 3 hours together and managed to carry out all the activities that had been planned. They also had non-structural conversations with the multigrade class teachers and the administrator of the village school

*Phase 4:* Simultaneously with the site experience, student teachers were supervised and coordinated by the researchers. Student teachers were asked to reveal their reflections in a written format. Student teachers' perceptions were also collected via focus group discussions and student teachers also had meetings with the researchers after the visit. Reflection reports were used as the primary source of data while focus group interviews transcriptions were only used when there is a need to find explanation. Therefore it should be noted that researchers did not use focus group interviews as a source of data for the analysis.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection lasted two weeks after the school visit. Afterwards the students were asked to report their reflections on their experience. The qualitative data were drawn from the reflections reported by 109 student teachers. Reflection reports were unstructured essays on which students wrote their opinions in a freestyle format that included feelings and comments on the events or situations.

### **Data Analysis**

We used Marshall and Rossman (1999) as a reference in the analysis of the data. These steps included: a) organizing data; b) identifying themes, patterns, and categories; c) testing the emergent hypothesis against the data; d) searching for alternative explanations of the data; and e) writing the report. We then selected excerpts from the transcripts and placed them into broad categories in search of thematic connections within and among the transcripts (Seidman, 1998).

The formation and interpretation of categories were done by the researchers using the procedures of thematic analysis. The data were analyzed during content analysis as a qualitative research method. The analysis was conducted by two researchers in order to make it reliable. In the first phase of the analysis, the unrelated themes were discarded. The next step was the formation and interpretation of the categories. There were two main themes describing the student teachers' reflections with regards to the previously stated research questions.

### Results and Discussion

As seen in Table 1, student teachers' perceptions of the constraints and barriers encountered by the village school teachers revealed three sub themes; teaching qualifications, difficulties and complications in general, and physical/material quality of the classrooms and the school. Student teachers' perceptions on attitudes towards being a teacher resulted in two sub themes, which are realistic views and idealistic views.

**Table 1.**

*Student Teachers' Perceptions of Multigrade Classroom*

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**Theme 1. Student Teachers' Perceptions of Constraints/Barriers Encountered by Teachers**

Teaching qualifications

Difficulties and complications in general

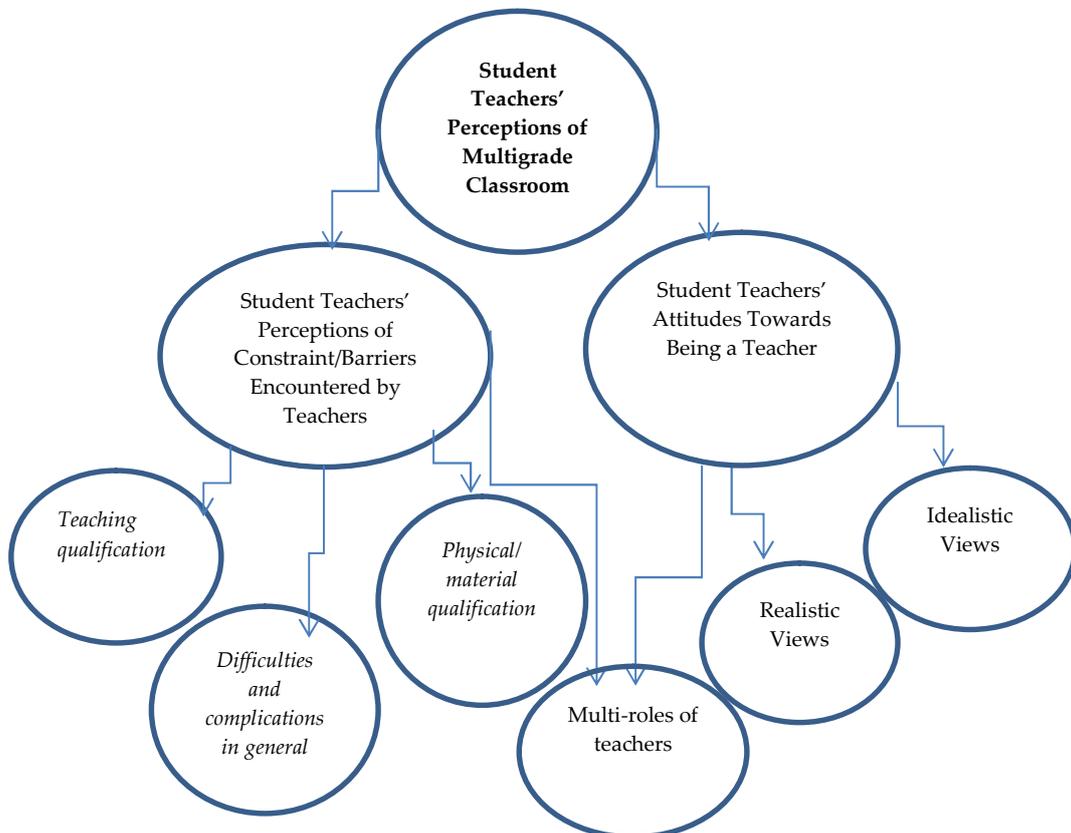
Physical/material quality

**Theme 2. Student Teachers' Attitudes Towards Being a Teacher**

Realistic Views

Idealistic Views

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**Figure 1.** Student teachers' perceptions of village schools

A similar categorization can be seen in Figure 1. However, what is quite striking here is that both themes share a common feature in that students attribute more than one role to the teachers in such disadvantaged schools. The remaining part of the paper will focus on the reflections of student teachers, elaborating on the aforementioned themes.

### **Theme 1. Student Teachers' Perceptions of Constraints/Barriers Encountered by Teachers in Multigrade Classrooms**

Student teachers' reflections centered upon their teaching qualifications and physical/material opportunities the teachers have in these classrooms. Only 34 participants mentioned teachers' difficulties/complications about curriculum necessities and methodological aspects in multigrade classes. A lack of teachers and educational materials serve as the main roadblocks that affect students' learning opportunities. The following words reflect the concerns revealed by most of the student teachers:

"...as far as I have observed, not only teachers but also students have been influenced by inefficient educational conditions..." (Ayşe, Sophomore Student in Early Childhood Education)

"... some of the first graders cannot read and write even though they are in the spring semester ..." (Ali, Sophomore Student in Counseling and Psychological Guidance)

"... this has been a real shock for most of my friends. We will no longer complain about the lack of opportunities in our schools..." (Selin, Sophomore Student in English Language and Teaching)

Almost all of the students who visited the three schools were shocked by the difficult conditions they witnessed in the village schools. They also found it interesting that the school principals are given multiple responsibilities such as being a teacher, being a principal, taking care of the cleaning of the infrastructure, and being a father figure for the students. They admired the way how those three male teachers shouldered these responsibilities, some of which were never defined in their job descriptions. Almost one quarter of the (29) student teachers thought that teachers encountered loneliness, which led them to be fully devoted to their jobs. However, it turned out during the conversations that all of the three principals had the opportunity to move to a school in the city center as early as possible, since they had completed their compulsory period as a teacher in a village school. Yet, they do not want to be separated from their students and their families because they believe that the longer they live there and spend time with the children, the more impact they have on the lives of those children and their parents.

As for the teaching quality and meeting the needs of individual students in the class, student teachers were concerned about the ways in which these expectations could be met. Fourteen student teachers underlined their impressions and concerns about the difficulties and complications experienced by teachers.

"... Mr. Ahmet was the administrator and the teacher of first and second graders at the same time. He said that a counselor came and left soon. However, he himself insisted on staying there patiently ..."

The following excerpt was echoed in the voices of the student teachers:

"... It is difficult for the teachers to deal with their students equally where children of different ages have different academic and psychological needs. For example first graders who have separation anxiety demand more affection and are jealous of older students ..." (Tuğçe, Sophomore Student in Counseling and Psychological Guidance)

This concern was expressed especially by the student teachers from the department of Counseling and Psychological Guidance. This is consistent with the experiences shared by the three principals at the village schools. In addition to the lack of classroom teachers, lack of school counselors has been one the main barriers school principals face during their interaction with the students.

This site visitation made a huge impression on almost all of the student teachers. They said that they understood the value of having a dual degree in faculties of education. Therefore, having an interdisciplinary perspective of human development and learning has become a primary goal in some of the students' minds. In spite of having all these constraints, learning opportunities could be experienced in some cases. Almost a quarter of the student teachers observed that pupils could implicitly learn another subject while learning one subject.

Twenty-one student teachers reported positive views on physical/material facilities of the schools whereas 15 student teachers had negative views. They were surprised to see smart boards and projectors in the classrooms. This was a paradox for most them: having only one teacher taking many responsibilities in limited living conditions within the school but having relatively high-instructional technological facilities. They interpreted this as being stuck in dilemmas. It may be the fact that having limited opportunities had forced both teachers and students to be creative.

## **Theme 2. Student Teachers' Attitudes towards Being a Teacher**

Student teachers focused on two main areas with regard to their attitudes towards being a teacher. These were put under the sub themes of "realistic views" and "idealistic views." The realistic views based on implications come from student teachers' observations on the current state of the teachers and centered upon the sociological perspective of educational opportunities. Forty-nine student teachers reported their views on sociological implications underlying the importance of creating equal educational opportunities for all students. All of them perceived the practice of "multigrade classes" as a phenomenon that results from the inequalities in education. Most of the student teachers asserted that they visited village schools with the assumption that there might be a communication barrier with the pupil. However, a quarter of them reported that they found their interaction with the pupil

effective. During their visit, all of the student teachers had positive impressions as to both the teachers and the students. It could be inferred from their reflections that they have gained awareness of their prejudices about the pupils in villages based on the idea that students in the village cannot communicate as much as students in the cities. Having been involved in activities during their visit, they stated in their reflections that they felt like children once again by being in a rural area with kids. Zeynep and Murat expressed their excitement and happiness:

“...we played plenty of games and activities like volleyball, basketball, playdough, dodgeball, gambling, chess.... We and the children were so happy and we were like children as well as teachers ...”(Zeynep, Sophomore Student in English Language and Teaching)

“...it was interesting that children joined and played with us easily without feeling like strangers,”(Betül, Sophomore Student in Counseling and Psychological Guidance)

“...one of the students said that she usually gets on a bread lorry to come to school. It seems as though they want to study further despite the hard conditions they are in ... (... I see people struggling to get an education in newspapers and on TV). Ironically if you go only a few miles away from this village you will see lives of children with luxury and prosperity ... This is the reality of life ...”

Student teachers indicated that this unique experience enabled them to see the reality of life and to be more aware of the role of teachers. Most of them indicated that they would have preferred to work at a school in advantaged settings had they not seen such a diverse picture. However, being in interaction with the kids in these disadvantaged settings, they came to realize the value of teachers as leaders who make changes in the lives of families and children in disadvantaged places. This idea was confirmed by the experiences of two of the school principals, who have to commute at least four hours a day between school and home. School principals were observed to have the preference to stay in the city center rather than staying in the small apartments allocated for them on the school campus. They seem to stay connected with the city to feel its atmosphere although they have to spend a huge amount of time commuting, changing at least 3 buses between their home and school. Student teachers were amazed by the way how school principals and teachers maintain their daily routines. They seem to be happy with their current lives although there were times they had to hitchhike for a ride. Most of the student teachers believe that school principals and teachers do not seem to be intimidated by the roadblocks they have encountered; instead, they seem to find it adventurous as well as beneficial for creating a network with the people. Students teachers' reflections showed that they seemed to be happy with their current roles as they were respected and appreciated by the residents of the villages as well as the workers who work in the transportation and construction business in that area. What was common in all the reflections was the hidden beauty behind the challenges and constraints.

From another perspective, student teachers' views were reflected through an idealistic lens. They were derived from student teachers' desires and motivations. The idealistic views

revealed two sub-themes, which are *professional attitude* and *the passion for teaching*. Twenty-seven participants reported their positive views on being a teacher, which will be their future career. Forty-four participants reported their perceptions on their own inner process in a way of reflecting their motivations for working in village schools or disadvantaged schools. Their reflections showed the passion for teaching which could be cultivated from these experiences:

" ... This visit made me realize how necessary it is to educate these children in village schools. There's no way to earn a living except for being educated, and the teacher has been a witness of this reality... "

"...I was surprised by the drawings of a second grade student because these were creative and wonderful. I asked her what job she would like to have in the future, she said she wanted to be a fashion designer. I advised her to stick to this dream because her designs were so impressive..." "...everything was lovely, I had a great time and I felt very good and still smiling when I got home..."

"... I noticed that the students were like brothers and sisters and showed solidarity to each other which will help them in the future..."

"... I have seen once more that life is not equal. My experience of multigrade classes affected my attitude positively, which will surely emerge in the future in my acts towards my students. I agreed with the teacher when he mentioned that every single person in the teaching profession should have such an experience..."

"...I felt that a teacher is venerable / holy in the eyes of students...the intrinsic value of being a teacher is worth all the complexity. I'd like to be a teacher in a village school when I graduate... I think there's not a more beautiful scene than a little student coming to you, running and hugging you, sharing something special.....although it seems that the physical condition of the school is not very good, the teacher is the person who opens the world's door to these students... this visit enlightened me and showed me that school concept is much more than a construction or a building.... "

Student teachers' positives insights showed that their field trips enabled them to realize that they would be happy if they worked as a teacher at a disadvantaged school. They had the courage that could make their students happy as long as they take their jobs seriously with love and passion. They have the epiphany phase where there has been a broad positive picture hidden under the pessimist one. Looking at these schools and kids from positive lenses will provide them opportunities for professional growth in addition to touching the lives of the disadvantaged. Student teachers also understood that teachers in the village schools are supposed to perform much more than the teachers in normal schools would do. They show a parental kind of affection, which means their role is not limited to that of a teacher's.

Ayşe's words were echoed in almost all of the student teachers' reflections:

"...Mr. Ahmet, said that he sometimes changed children's clothes, cleaned their noses up, taught them how to brush their teeth all while employing interactive teaching techniques.....What I have concluded at the end of this visit is that actually there's nothing impossible at all, it is all about making a difference ..."

“The teachers are not just teachers but they are also administrators, parents and the counselors for the students. It’s not easy to fulfill these roles concurrently.”

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

This project revealed two main themes. Firstly, student teachers' perceptions of the constraints experienced in the visited educational settings were reflected upon. Their concerns appeared to be juxtaposed with their philosophy of what it is like to be a teacher, and their experiences shaped their understandings of teaching. The finding of the study, in terms of the ways the student teachers conceive of constraints and barriers they encounter, parallels other research results which have revealed that teaching in multigrade classes is difficult but not impossible (Sag, 2009) and that multigrade teachers have professional needs, just as their students have social and emotional needs (Sag and Sezer, 2012).

The second theme is about student teachers' thoughts from the perspective of realistic and idealistic views about the teaching profession. The results of the study revealed that experiential learning for student teachers made the reality of multigrade classes more clear. Students became aware of the lack of physical facilities in multigrade classrooms and the work overload of the teachers due to lack of personnel. This study indicates that experiencing multigrade teaching as an exceptional educational case could evoke idealistic thoughts in student teachers' minds and give them an opportunity to be role models for the students in their future career.

Another finding in the study relates to attitudes towards being a teacher. They are consistent with the results found in Chen's research on the benefits of service learning projects in pre-service teacher education (Chen, 2003). Scholarship in service learning projects showed that a field research-based course could support the development of student teachers' professional identity through the use of reflective practice (Chen, 2003; Gilardi and Lozza, 2009; Agaoglu, Turhan and Ceylan, 2010; Hacifazlıoğlu, Ozdemir and Uzunboylu, 2010). In this context, our study suggests that practice-based field approach or visitation to these areas could promote student teachers' points of view in cases of multigrade classes (Gilardi and Lozza, 2009). In this specific case, for example, student teachers not only noticed the multiple roles expected from a teacher in disadvantaged schools, but they also had the chance to reflect on their thoughts related to the teaching profession.

Similar to what we have found above, Cheng (2009) believes that students' learning should be facilitated in such a way that local and global resources, support, and networks can be harnessed to maximize the opportunities for their developments during the learning process. Thus, through localization and globalization, there are multiple sources of learning. Students can learn inside and outside their schools, and students should not be limited to a small number of teachers in their schools.

This field trip could be analyzed from multiple lenses. In addition to student teachers' self-reflections with regards to their own professional development as student teachers, a learning community appeared to be established between our student teachers and the faculty. In line with this dimension, Clark (2003) illustrates good teaching with a

representation of a triangulation based on three relationships. One vertex is labeled with the pronoun I (standing for the teacher educator), a second with the pronoun Thou (standing for the student teacher), and the third labeled It (standing for the curriculum). He challenged teacher educators to question their "I - Thou relationships" in faculties of education. In such a short field visit, as teacher educators, we had the opportunity to question our own I - Thou relationships. Therefore, this experience created a platform both for our students and for ourselves as teacher educators to examine our relationships and connection with our student teachers. Deans and department chairs are expected to tailor their plans to create such interactive learning platforms for teacher educators and student teachers. They should serve as instructional leaders to create professional learning communities within their faculties.

Clark (2001), Bakioglu, Ozcan and Hacifazlıoğlu (2010), Bakioglu and Hacifazlıoğlu (2011), Hacifazlıoğlu (2010) and Oztabak, Ozişik and Hacifazlıoğlu (2014) also underline the importance of "Mentorship and Communities of Experience Sharing Model" for student teachers. Vygotsky (1978) and Wenger (2008) proposed professional learning groups whereby teachers and student teachers could learn through social interaction. This has also been of great importance in terms of successful realization of the project since we paid great importance to cultivate the social interaction among student teachers, teachers, principals and faculty members.

It has been recognized that the research design in this study does have some limitations. Firstly, the time limit might have been extended so that the student teachers could visit the multigrade classes at least once a week during a period of one academic term in order to carry out further research. The second issue is related to the wide range of observational data. The observations of the student teachers included too much diversity rather than an emphasis on some specific aspects of the multigrade classes. One solution could have been to divide them into small groups with the aim of observing specific areas, which would have made the data more reliable. Finally, although the participants were asked to write immediate feedback on their thoughts and experiences, a follow-up report after a certain period of time might have revealed possible changes in their opinions. Further research could be conducted taking these limitations into consideration.

The notion of "Communities of Practice" is expected to bring unique insights for researchers in ways of developing social responsibility projects for student teachers. Hacifazlıoğlu, Ozdemir and Uzunboylu (2010) have asserted that the notion of social responsibility should be infused in the university setting and it should be practiced in a way that includes all faculty members, and that the administration should accept and internalize this as a part of its responsibility (p. 458). Through these partnerships academic projects could enlighten the practice and give inspiration for all the stakeholders of education.

This study is based on sociocultural theories with the assumption that learning and development occur through social interaction in cultural practices through the use of language, artifacts and tools (Vygotsky, 1978). In this context, this site visitation provided student teachers with a platform of professional learning surrounded by socio-emotional and academic support systems among student teachers, schools and faculty. Student

teachers were expected to acquire new understandings of multigrade classrooms and the practice while being actively involved with social practice with teachers and students (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002).

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