



QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVES IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

It is well known and acknowledged that qualitative perspectives in initial teacher education strongly benefit student teachers and help them develop deeper insights into the teaching profession. Adding a qualitative perspective to teacher education programs can equip student teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills and pedagogical abilities to understand human behaviour. Despite consensus that the qualitative approach should be a major part of teacher preparation, programs in Turkey do not seem to include this crucial component. The present study briefly examines some of the worldwide practices of qualitative approaches in teacher education and discusses their implications for teacher education programs in Turkey.

Key Words: Qualitative approach, initial teacher education, programs.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the complexity of what goes on in the classroom is not an easy task for teachers since teaching is an occupation that operates in settings that have high levels of multidimensionality, immediacy and unpredictability (Hammersley, 2000). Teaching is usually characterized as being many-sided and multi-disciplined. An understanding of self from multiple perspectives is necessary for teachers to improve problematic aspects of the task of teaching. It is thus important that teachers watch themselves, step back and, distanced from immediate conflicts, gain a larger view of what is happening. During this reflection period, a certain distance is needed in order to consider carefully one's own decisions and their role in practice (Tickle, 1991; Kansanen, 1999). Towards that end, initial teacher education that includes a curriculum governed by principles of research-based teaching is essential. Such a curriculum, designed to develop student teachers' research capabilities, would help them become "first and foremost effective researchers of their own practices", which is a central asset to becoming an effective teacher (Tickle, 1991).

It is at this critical point that a qualitative research approach can strongly benefit teachers. It helps the teacher become a more astute observer of the whole school environment (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007), which is only possible by practicing two of the basic skills of qualitative researchers - observing and interviewing (Croker, 2009). Qualitative approaches stimulate soul-searching and enable teachers to learn to analyze the agencies and structures that they and their students have to face (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007).

As teachers, when we walk into the classroom each day, we often first look around the classroom and at our students, trying to develop a sense of the classroom atmosphere and the students that day. During or after the class, we might find ourselves talking to a few of the students, probing how they are and how they feel about the class, to help us better understand their behaviour and attitudes. As Ms Walker (a teacher quoted in Williams et al., 2008) states, we teachers not only teach but also have the equally important responsibility of getting to know our students, to understand what they need emotionally as well as academically. In doing so, we constantly hold a mirror up to the world, to the behaviours of our students, parents, colleagues, and others, problematizing the challenges we face every day in our classrooms and staffrooms. We also turn that mirror on to ourselves, trying to figure out our role and position in this culture.



Qualitative research fits the needs of practicing teachers perfectly. With its interest in providing a description, understanding and interpretation of human phenomena, human interaction or human discourse rather than in testing hypotheses (Lichtman, 2006), qualitative approaches help teachers develop deeper insights into their teaching practice and their classrooms. It encourages teachers to reflect on their professional needs, current understandings and complexities of the educational process. In other words, a qualitative dimension gives them “the freedom to continuously reinvent themselves via their research and knowledge production” (Kincheloe, 2003: 18).

Adding a qualitative perspective to teachers’ agenda does not mean that teachers are expected to keep detailed field notes every day or formally interview a large number of participants. Teaching is teachers’ primary responsibility, and research can be seen as a tool to help improve teaching practice. It offers teachers the capacity to act as researchers, as part of their teaching role. They can begin to take themselves less for granted, and see themselves more as a focus of their own reflection and observation as they go about teaching each day (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). As Kincheloe (2003: 40) states, research for teachers is an “act which engages them in the dynamics of the educational process, as it brings to consciousness the creative tension between social and educational theory and classroom practice”.

To equip pre-service teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills and pedagogical abilities to understand human behaviour, it is essential that teacher education programs employ more qualitative approaches, as Bogdan and Biklen (2007: 245) suggest:

The qualitative approach requires researchers to develop empathy with people under study and to make concerted efforts to understand various points of view. Judgment is not the goal; rather, the goal is to understand the informants’ world and to determine how and with what criteria they judge it. This approach is useful in teacher-training programs because it offers prospective teachers the opportunity to explore the complex environment of schools and at the same time become more self-conscious about their own values and how these values influence their attitudes towards their students, principals, and others.

Today there is generally a greater understanding of the role and importance of including a research dimension in teacher education programs. It is now well established in theory that initial teacher education needs to acquaint student teachers with the nature of research, particularly qualitative methodologies. This will encourage pre-service teachers to view themselves as beginning teachers and view the school at which they start through a ‘teacher as researcher lens’ (Gray and Campbell-Evans, 2002; Kincheloe, 2003).

Despite the recognition it has received worldwide in the field of education, qualitative research is not often included in the curricula of teacher education programs. These programs continue to emphasize “learning how to teach” rather than “learning from teaching”; the latter refers to the idea that teachers integrate theory and experience together through reflection and critical analysis (Breidenstein et al., 2001). The European Commission report entitled Green Paper on Teacher Education in Europe (2000) suggests that the relationship between teacher education, the teaching profession and educational research and development needs to be redefined. The same report claims that student teachers are usually introduced to research that has no relevance to teaching and the teaching profession.

In his study on the perceptions of 21 graduate students of education about qualitative research methodology and its teaching, Saban (2007) identified five reasons why including qualitative research methodology courses in teacher education programs in Turkey is of great importance to student teachers:

1. Pre-service teachers should be urged to be researchers and, at the same time, to be able to read and understand research studies in education.
2. Pre-service teachers knowledgeable about qualitative research procedures could assess their practicum from a more rigorous point of view. Empowered with the appropriate skills to observe others, pre-service teachers could see the classroom atmosphere in a new light, discovering new aspects about the teaching context.
3. Qualitative research methodology helps teachers identify and resolve problems they face in the educational arena, by participating in some form of action research.



4. Courses on qualitative research methodology enable pre-service teachers to conduct research studies on their own, contributing to their professional development.
5. Knowledge of qualitative research techniques is especially useful for those who wish to carry out post-graduate studies.

Similarly, Selcuk (2000) highlights the importance of a qualitative perspective in teacher education, with special emphasis placed upon observation as a qualitative data collection tool to help develop an understanding of behaviour. Selcuk claims that teachers trained in observation skills can develop a better understanding of their classroom processes within a relatively short period. Purposeful and systematic observation enables teachers to stay in control of their classroom, which enhances the quality of learning and teaching. In addition, teachers who are familiar with observation processes can understand the behaviours of other teachers and principals from an open, inductive and holistic perspective. Selcuk further states that teachers can be encouraged to think about what they are trying to achieve through self-observation. This kind of self-reflection helps teachers become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses.

A QUICK LOOK AT SOME OF THE WORLDWIDE PRACTICES

The worldwide practice of including a qualitative dimension in teacher education programs is grounded in the idea of a *spiral curriculum*, in which research goes across the curriculum and is integrated with other studies. In Finland, for instance, the basic idea of teacher education is to develop the capacity for pedagogical thinking and argumentation, which is called *research-based teacher education*. It is assumed that all teaching is based on teacher research, and that the role of the student teacher is an active one. Three broad content areas, namely, pedagogical content knowledge, the theory of education and teaching practice, are in constant reciprocal interaction, with research-based thinking forming the connecting factor in this process. Overall, the Finnish approach resembles action research and is consistent with qualitative research (Kansanen, 1999; Jyrhama et al., 2008; Toom et al., 2008).

With the rapid growth of interest in qualitative research since the 1980s, the idea that student teachers conduct small-scale empirical studies as part of their professional development has gained considerable importance (Punch, 2009). A study conducted by Breidenstein et al. (2001) at Trinity University, Texas, represents one effective model for integrating a qualitative approach into teacher education courses through such projects. A research project in which student teachers designed, researched and wrote up a qualitative study was completed during the pedagogics course. The aim of the project was to develop and promote a reflective orientation toward teaching and learning using qualitative research as a tool. The outcomes of the student teachers' qualitative research fell into four distinct categories: classroom inquiry, collegial inquiry, pedagogical inquiry and reflective inquiry. Although the research project initially engendered anxiety and resentment, it later turned out to be an important method to help develop reflective practitioners. One clear result was that it fostered the development of an inquiry-based stance toward teaching and professional activity.

More recently, Graziano (2011) worked with 16 student teachers in the United States to gather data from ESL learners at an elementary school using *photovoice*, a form of qualitative research that utilizes documentary photography and storytelling. The study attempted to explore the educational realities of ESL learners at this urban school in the Southwest. The student teachers were first trained in photovoice procedures; later, they provided their ESL learners with cameras and basic training on how to use them. These learners were encouraged to photograph images on campus and off campus at home and in their community. At the end of the study, student teachers asked ESL learners to tell their story for two of the photographs they had taken. On the last day of the class, all photographs were displayed in a public photo exhibit at the college. Overall, the student teachers were fascinated with photovoice and inquired during and after class on how it could be utilized as a teaching strategy. They appreciated the real-world application of the language acquisition course and ability to bridge theory to practice. Several student teachers reported their teaching skills and abilities were enhanced as a result of this empowering experience because they could understand learners' needs better. They also stated that the experience helped them better understand the importance of culture, community and language in education.



A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION IN TURKEY

Over the last two decades, teacher education programs in Turkey have undergone serious changes as part of major shifts and reforms in the educational arena evident throughout the world. In order to improve the pre-service education of teachers, the Turkish Higher Education Council has restructured the faculties of education, changing the composition of departments and revised the content of courses. The recent curriculum, which has been followed since the 2006-2007 academic year, offers new courses in addition to existing ones. These reform efforts have sought to provide uniformity and standardization among teacher education curricula followed by education faculties around the country. One of the basic changes in the programs has been an increased focus on teaching methodology, school experience and practice teaching (Taşkın, 2006; Grossman, Onkol, and Sands, 2007; Cosgun-Ogeyik, 2009).

Despite consensus and mounting evidence that the qualitative perspective should be a major component of teacher education, programs in Turkey are still not fully on the road to change. Not only courses on qualitative research methodology but also on research methodology in general are virtually non-existent in teacher education programs in the country. The few research courses that have been introduced to student teachers look far from being effective (Arikan, 2004; Saban, 2007).

The two courses, namely School Experience and Practice Teaching are compulsory for senior student teachers. The purpose of the School Experience course is to introduce student teachers to the teaching profession and offer experience within primary or secondary schools. Observation, which is a difficult skill to do well, and which needs practice and rigour (Cowie, 2009), is the key element of the School Experience course. Yet, in this traditional model of practice, student teachers are allocated to schools with no on-campus preparation and support for this experience. It is generally the case that student teachers go to the practice school without knowing how to collect data, since they have not been trained beforehand on approaches to observation, making field notes, preparing checklists or using video, audio recordings and artefacts like photographs and organizational charts (Cowie, 2009). It is important that student teachers establish “the focus of the observations, selecting the cases for observation and as appropriate, selecting within cases for observation” (Punch, 2009).

In the last semester, student teachers are expected to satisfy a term-long practice teaching requirement. They are assigned to different public and private schools where they do their student experience program for one day a week, within the scope of the Practice Teaching course. Student teachers are encouraged to implement and apply the methods taught in their teacher education courses. Theoretically, the course content encourages trainee reflection and puts a stronger emphasis on “learning from teaching” than “learning how to teach” (Breidenstein et al., 2001). In practice, however, reflection is absent from many Practice Teaching courses. As passive receivers, many student teachers in Turkey still consider ‘seeing what to do’ is more important than ‘understanding why it is done’ (Peacock, 2009). Rarely are they provided with opportunities to reflect on their ideas relating to teaching in general or on their own teaching practice experiences (Atay, 2007). Even if such opportunities are created by some instructors, student teachers still need guided practice in order to integrate theory and experience together through reflection and critical analysis.

School Experience and Practice Teaching courses require student teachers to keep diaries and write student teaching portfolios in which they can record their thoughts and emotions as they experience the classroom. Such introspective techniques are valuable in providing insight into the thought processes of student teachers, and are suitable for gathering affective data for later reflection. However, keeping a diary or journal is not always an easy option for student teachers, who find the process burdensome and tiring (Wallace, 2002; Lee McKay, 2009). Therefore, it is important that student teachers have been made acquainted with such qualitative research techniques before they start using them in the final year of their training.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We believe that it is possible to make five recommendations to more firmly integrate a qualitative perspective into teacher education programs in Turkey:

1. The practice teaching period is a very important component of teacher education programs since it has a profound effect on student teachers' overall perception of the teaching profession. However, reflection, "a way to gain knowledge about one's doings and about the interaction in the teaching-studying-learning process" (Kansanen, 1999: 136), is not encouraged enough within the Turkish context (see, for instance, Gürbüz, 2006; Atay, 2007; Coskun and Daloglu, 2010). In order to provide more space for reflection, student teachers can be asked to complete a number of investigative assignments such as a teacher and peer interview/observation, an administrator interview, an analysis of student metaphors about school and an analysis of a videotaped teaching lesson. Such assignments completed using qualitative tools such as interview and observation would encourage student teachers to reflect on their teaching experience, identify problems and discuss issues related to teaching (Gitlin et al., 1999; Akcan, 2010).
2. It seems essential that the School Experience course should be given more importance in teacher education programs in Turkey. As proposed by Coskun and Daloglu (2010), such a course should start earlier in the program and provide a wider range of experiences at different schools. More importantly, student teachers should be made familiar with observation, "the hallmark of qualitative methods" (Padgett, 2008) before beginning any fieldwork. In order to equip student teachers with observation skills, they should be given observation assignments not only in the last year but also throughout their study period. Only by having hands-on experience can student teachers learn how to do a more systematic, thorough and non-judgemental form of observation than the necessarily self-interested and selective observations done in daily life (Padgett, 2008).
3. It is unfortunately the case that courses in teacher education programs in Turkey are still offered using a traditional method of instruction that strongly emphasises theoretical knowledge. There are studies that have been conducted in Turkey (see, for example, Korkmaz, 2009a; Korkmaz, 2009b) which report that levels of critical thinking of teachers and student teachers are not extremely high, which is a disturbing result for education faculties. Therefore, more courses and practices that can contribute to the development of student teachers' critical thinking skills should be integrated into teacher education programs soon. Critical thinking, as Pithers and Soden (2000) propose, includes such abilities and dispositions as the skill of argument; a spirit of inquiry; evaluation; clarifying and focusing the problem; and analysing, understanding and making use of inferences. Qualitative approaches can play an important role in teaching critical skills to student teachers and in helping them learn to think well and for themselves. As Kincheloe (2003: 19) claims, "questioning the unquestionable has never been a picnic in the park". Yet, only critically minded teachers would dare to analyse education situations in order to increase the quality of teaching and learning.
4. Despite its unique potential as a component of teacher education programs, a qualitative perspective cannot be included properly in the absence of teacher educators who are interested in qualitative work. It is thus important that "the entire faculty of the higher education unit is committed to the same organizing theme and that they understand it in the same way" (Krokkfors et al., 2011: 12). Integrating a qualitative approach into teacher education first requires that teacher educators appreciate this approach and its role in producing "pedagogically thinking teachers" (Krokkfors et al., 2011: 3).
5. Despite the wealth of benefits the qualitative perspective offers to teacher education, great care should be taken to tailor it to teacher education programs. Qualitative research courses and/or projects should be introduced carefully to students, with careful and thoughtful reference to teachers' everyday reality. In accordance with this pragmatic orientation, student teachers' perceptions of everyday school practice should be taken into account. Besides, proper timing is very important when introducing student teachers to methods and methodology. It seems more reasonable to expose them to the more complicated and formal dimensions of qualitative work after they have developed a strong understanding of research in general. It should be noted that the aim is not to produce researchers, but rather to educate autonomous and reflective teachers who have a positive attitude towards research (Kansanen, 1999; Toom et al., 2008; Krokkfors et al., 2011).



In conclusion, student teachers in Turkey need to develop a reflective orientation towards teaching and learning as early as possible through research courses and/or qualitative research projects that are systematically taught in an integrated curriculum. In addition to theoretically oriented method courses, student teachers really need to develop basic qualitative skills like observation, interview, introspection and retrospection. Although it is by no means the only way to develop reflective practitioners, qualitative research, with its "reflective capacity" (Hammersley, 2000), can help student teachers learn from their own teaching experiences (Breidenstein et al., 2001).

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