



Received: 03 October 2014
Accepted: 21 May 2015
Published: 18 June 2015

*Corresponding author: Suad Sakallı Gümüş, Faculty of Education, Department of Special Education, Mustafa Kemal University, Hatay, Turkey
E-mail: ssakalli@umail.iu.edu

Reviewing editor:
Mark Boylan, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Additional information is available at the end of the article

TEACHER EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Learning to teach special education: A balancing act of assumptions, reality, and best practice

Suad Sakallı Gümüş^{1*}

Abstract: Thirty-two pre-service special education teachers carried out a 14-week informal practicum arranged for the purposes of this research to accompany the three classes they were taking in their program of study and to provide them with the needed setting and opportunities for hands-on experiences and reflection as they construct an understanding of the content offered to them in the program. Data were collected via structured observation, interviews, weekly reflection logs, and group discussions. Qualitative methods were employed to capture the developmental processes of the pre-service teachers. The study utilized the Critical Realistic perspective and the Ecological Systems Theory as theoretical framework. The teachers seemed to have developed their own vision to overcome theory–practice gap and were more open to collaborative efforts by the end of the study. Findings are discussed and implications for special education teacher preparation are deliberated.

Subjects: Classroom Practice; Curriculum Studies; Education; Education Studies; Educational Research; Inclusion and Special Educational Needs; Qualitative Methods; Teaching & Learning – Education; Technology in Education; Theories of Learning

Keywords: special education; teacher education; theory–practice gap; reflection; professional identity development



Suad Sakallı Gümüş

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Suad Sakallı Gümüş was born in 1973 in Turkey. She earned her BA and Elementary Teaching certification in 1995 from Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University Faculty of Education in Turkey. After two years of teaching in elementary school, she received her Special Education teaching certification and taught in a self-contained class. In 2003, she received her MS and in 2008, her PhD from Indiana University, USA, in Curriculum & Instruction Special Education. After four years of service as associate instructor and a year of service as a visiting faculty member at Indiana University in Bloomington, she currently serves as an assistant professor of Special Education at Mustafa Kemal University in Turkey. She teaches and conducts research actively in teacher education, education of students with mental retardation, curriculum-based assessment, assistive technologies, Universal Design for Learning, Students with visual impairments, Students with Autism, and Inclusive practices.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

It has been a common practice that we use “best practices” as we prepare teachers in teacher education programs. However, it is also a well-known fact that the realities in the field are not always aligned with what we teach. Therefore, teachers get a shock as they enter the field; they may feel ineffective in transferring their knowledge and skills to their practice and eventually get burned out leaving the teaching profession in their early years (Ingersoll, 2001; Melnick & Meister, 2008; Schulz, 2005; Yost, 2006). In order to prevent these from happening, teachers should be encountered with these realities earlier in their education and they should be assisted in overcoming these contradictions with the support of their supervisors from the teacher education program in a secure environment. This research aims at describing and documenting this approach as a tool to prepare more effective teachers.

1. Introduction

The increase in the number of students identified with special needs as well as the shifting paradigms in special education that came with the efforts to enter and integrate into the European Union have changed the educational terrain in Turkey (Yüksel, 2012). For example, the full inclusion movement now demands that schools move away from student hierarchies toward equal status and positive outcomes for all children, especially for students with special needs (Sakallı Gumus, Humphries, & Buterai, 2010; Turkish Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2011). Inclusion is generally understood around the world as part of a human rights agenda that demands access to and equity in education (Florian, 2008). In Turkey, inclusion, access to education, and equal opportunities for enjoyment of rights have been recognized by law for individuals with special needs (Turkish Constitution Law No.: 2709, Date of Ratification: 1982, November 7; UNESCO, 2005; UNICEF, 2000). Even though it is established quite effectively at the policy level, effective inclusion of students with special needs has not been successful in practice in Turkey (Cavkaytar & Diken, 2007). The situation has not been any different in other developing countries. Although there is widespread support for inclusion at the philosophical level, many concerns and barriers have been frequently cited in the literature. Children face barriers within schools and classrooms due to the organization of curriculum and teaching methodologies. Throughout the world, particularly in developing countries, as in Turkey, children with disabilities and many others experiencing difficulties in school-related tasks such as learning, have traditionally been marginalized within or excluded from schools and the quality of instruction offered to them has been questionable (Ainscow & Haile-Giorgis, 1998; Levin & Lockheed 1993; Llyod, 2000). On the other hand, school administration and teachers are expected to facilitate inclusive practices (Hutchinson & Martin, 1999). Therefore, the key element to the realization of successful inclusive practices lies in how we prepare teachers (Rouse, 2008). Full access of students with special needs to education highly depends on how willing and skilled teachers are in critically observing and understanding the circumstances and responding to them effectively (Ryndak, Jackson, & Billingsley, 1999–2000). These realities have great implications for personnel preparation; we need to prepare teachers who have the professional competence to tackle diversity and disadvantages effectively (Villa, Thousand, & Chapple, 2000, p. 533), who can understand their students in the systems context collaborating with parents and colleagues (Darling-Hammond, 1997), and who have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will enable them to respond to the issues at hand effectively by creating the appropriate social, psychological, physical atmosphere to implement inclusive processes (Fisher, Frey, & Thousand, 2003; Sakallı Gumus, 2008; Sakallı Gumus et al., 2010).

The overall goal of the studied model was to prepare competent teachers (in terms of knowledge, skills, and dispositions), who can understand the dynamics in the field and engage in effective/best practices as they become special educators. This study used self-reflection and field experience as tools to help teacher candidates link theory to practice, negotiate new understandings from reviewing their assumptions, the knowledge they gained from theory instruction in their program of study, and their experiences in the field.

This research aimed to understand and document “what goes on in teachers’ minds” as they encounter with the content and the way special education is conducted in the field, and as they construct their professional identity. This study would also shed light on the question whether field experiences should start earlier in the program, rather than at the end of the program. It is clear that not all field experiences will actually help bridge the theory–practice gap, and that merely requiring more field experience is not necessarily better (Allsopp, DeMarie, Alvarez-McHatton, & Doone, 2006; Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006; Zeichner, 1980). However, to ensure the desired effects of field experiences as suggested in the literature, explicit purposes should be set, understood by the teacher candidates and supported by mentors, evaluated on ongoing basis, and developmentally sequenced and aligned with the curriculum taught in the program (Cruikshank & Armaline, 1986; Grisham, Berg, Jacob, & Mathison, 2002). This study was arranged to align the structured field experience with three methods courses taken in the program, keeping the ongoing reflection and evaluation in the core of the approach.

A primary goal of the model is to engage the teacher candidates in professional activities within schools in order to develop the skills of inquiry, reflection, problem-solving, and collaboration. According to Merrill (2009), learning is promoted when knowledge is applied and integrated in the real world. Learning is enhanced when teacher candidates are provided with multiple opportunities to apply what they have learned in meaningful contexts (Gagne, 1985; Howard, 1999; Light & Cox, 2005; Perkins & Unger, 1999; Rock & Levin, 2002). A model where teacher candidates both take their courses and complete the related tasks in an actual school setting is one approach that can provide the chance for learning in a meaningful context.

2. Methodology

Thirty-two pre-service special education teachers attended a 14-week informal practicum arranged for this research to accompany the three classes they were taking in their program of study (see Appendix A). The practicum was aligned with the three classes; (1) Changing Attitudes towards Individuals with Disabilities, (2) Traditional and Alternative Assessment Methods, and (3) Functional Behavior Assessment. The participant pre-service teachers were sophomores who were in their second year of an undergraduate special education teacher education program at a large university in south of Turkey. The age of the pre-service teachers ranged from 18 to 22. Eighteen female and 14 male students attended the practicum. This was the first time they had been to the field as pre-service teachers. The practicum was to provide the needed setting and opportunities for reflection, and the hands-on experiences to help the participants construct their own understanding of the content offered to them in the program. They were expected to spend at least two hours per week in an inclusive or a self-contained special education setting conducting structured observations, interacting with the students, and helping with instruction when needed. The participants also conducted a functional behavior assessment with a student exhibiting problem behaviors followed by a behavior modification project and a semi-structured interview with their hosting teachers. The interviews with the hosting teachers aimed at eliciting information about their opinions related to special education/inclusion, barriers they have been facing in the field, and their suggestions for making special education more effective. Field notes were taken and reports furnished for the interviews by each participant which were submitted to the researcher. In addition, journals were written by each participant on a weekly basis. Finally, issues/thoughts that challenged the pre-service teachers in their field experience were discussed in weekly focus groups and notes were taken during these meetings. Data collected from the weekly journals, interviews, and focus group discussions were analyzed using qualitative methods in order to document the impact of these arrangements on the development of teacher candidates.

The practicum was carried out in randomly selected 18 different schools with 32 different hosting teachers (27 female and 5 male). The experience of the hosting teachers in the field ranged from 7 years to 26 years. The practicum setting was a self-contained classroom for 20 and an inclusive classroom for 12 pre-service teachers. The average number of students in the self-contained classrooms was eight and two students with disabilities per inclusive classroom.

The study is constructed and implemented from a stance of Critical Realistic Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1989), which are espoused in the field of education. The Ecological Systems Theory views human development within the context of relationships that form one's environment. It defines complex layers of environment, each of which has an impact on the development of and is impacted by interaction with that person (<http://pt3.nl.edu/paquetteryan-webquest.pdf>). Therefore, teachers got to understand themselves and their students as a product of their environments. On the other hand, the Critical Realistic perspective implies that there is a reality which exists independent of its human conception, meaning that social reality may be very different from its empirically observable surface appearance and is in fact stratified (Wikgren, 2004). This study explores the underlying factors that exist, of which teacher candidates are unaware but shape their actions, shape the way they conceive the world and perceive their students as professionals. Hence, the Ecological Systems perspective provided the broad perspective through which the underlying factors impacting their actions were reviewed by the teachers critically.

Written reflections, the transcribed interviews with the hosting teachers, and the notes taken during group discussions were analyzed (by the researcher who holds a PhD in Curriculum Instruction and Special Education and is the instructor of the courses aligned with the practicum and by two other graduate students who are Special Education teachers and are trained in how to conduct the analysis for the purposes of this study) using qualitative approaches, mainly document analysis. Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, and Richardson (2005) describe qualitative research as “a systematic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature, of a phenomenon within a particular context.” The qualitative inquiry method used could be defined as a “case study” because the main focus was to understand a specific model designed and used at a specific teacher education program. Creswell (1997) defines a case study as “an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case (or multiple cases) overtime through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (p. 61). This particular case (three courses and their practicum that are bounded by method and time) was selected to explore a specific way of preparing professionals and the impact of this model on their professional identity development. The analysis of this case is, as Schwandt (1997) suggests, “instrumentally useful in furthering understanding of a particular problem, issue, concept, and so on” (p. 13). In this case, understanding this specific method of training teachers and the outcomes of this method was integral to this case study and was useful in furthering our understanding of the problem of “how to prepare teachers effectively in bridging the gap between their assumptions, the realities of the field and the best practices they have been learning about in the program.”

In order to support my inquiry with relevant research and identify the areas in need of research, I chose the following questions to guide my research:

- (1) Are there any discrepancies between what teacher candidates learn at the university (theory) and the practices they observe in the field (practice)?
- (2) How field experience and reflection alter teacher candidates’ opinions (the impact of the experience on their readiness)?
- (3) How did the experience alter teacher candidates’ vision for their professional practice in the future (professional identity formation)?

Research indicates that professional identity development is highly impacted by teachers’ upbringing that is deeply rooted in their cultures (Sakallı Gumus, 2008). A study by Flores and Day (2006) indicated that teachers’ personal and professional histories and pre-service training have strong mediating influences in determining the kinds of teachers they become and their effectiveness. Hence, teacher education should design its curriculum to help teachers examine their backgrounds and help them understand the relationships between their background, the new knowledge and experiences they are encountering in their training, and their experiences with in the field.

Therefore, in this approach, the classes and the practicum component were arranged in a way to have teacher candidates;

- (1) Review self in their cultural and family context, and understand the roots of how disability and individuals with disabilities are perceived in their society and by themselves (Attitudes Towards Individuals with Special Needs)
- (2) Review the behaviors and actions of individuals with special needs in the context of their developmental and social background, and under the current circumstances (Functional Behavior Assessment, Traditional and Alternative Assessment Methods)
- (3) Encounter real-life situations in schools, apply the theoretical knowledge gained, and reflect on lived experiences (conduct the weekly practicum and write a self-reflection about the experience)

Weekly reflections were sorted and reviewed in a progression (14 weeks). To keep the identity of the participants hidden, pseudonyms for each participant were used in the analysis. Checklists for the

observations were developed by the researcher with the pre-service teachers and made available to be used in interviews with teachers. A training session for the use of checklists is provided by the researcher to the pre-service teachers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each hosting teacher by the pre-service teachers to elicit their opinions and as additional data source for triangulation. Interviews lasted approximately 30 min each, notes were taken and reports were furnished for each interview. Data (weekly journals, interview reports, and group discussion notes) were read and reread with the guidance of the research questions, and reappearing themes were coded by three different readers (the researcher, and two graduate students trained in how to conduct the reading and coding processes). Finally, themes were sorted based on their commonalities and condensed through a discussion among the three coders, until 80% agreement was reached, to construct the overarching themes presented in the findings section.

3. Findings

3.1. Self-realization: getting to the roots

Teachers seemed to have difficulty reviewing and critiquing their cultural values as they knew some of the hidden values are politically incorrect and may not be received well by many. Such an exercise (critiquing their upbringing, families, culture, and society) was very new to the majority. All (except five) teacher candidates stated to have grown in authoritarian families, in which questioning the way things conducted wasn't allowed. The more they learned about the Systems Theory and examined the dynamics among the subsystems using their lived experiences, the more comfortable they became talking about their systems developing the ability to critique the negative impact they may have on their personal and professional identity development. For example, the majority of teachers talked about the fact that disability is viewed as something to avoid being talked about in their culture, which, in itself, created a barrier to social interactions between the mainstream culture and individuals with disabilities and their families. They believed that this case brought many misunderstandings and assumptions about these people.

Teacher candidates overwhelmingly reported that most people in their social circles, including their families, perceived special education teaching profession as a low-profile job because they thought it would involve no real teaching, but rather a simple but very hard care tasks. Therefore, they tended to believe that it would be wasting their time, energy, resources, and intelligence as university graduates to do this job. However, the profession was selected mostly because it guarantees employment. Towards the end of the 14 weeks, teacher candidates, in their reflective journals and in their group discussions, however stated their concerns about the fact that no teacher should enter this profession for commercial purposes, but rather *"they should enter the profession for the sake of children and the love of teaching these children. The work done is tremendous and there could be no measure of this effort by pay (focus group 13)."* as exemplified with Zeida's comment and stated by all candidates in some form.

Teacher candidates reported the exposition to intentionally designed activities and course components to have helped them review their assumptions and misconceptions about individuals with disabilities and practices in the field.

3.2. Reconceptualizing their professional roles in the systems context

Teachers seemed to have realized that their role does not end only in school, but rather it extends across many systems surrounding the child. If they wanted to understand the roots of all problems impeding the success of their students, they realized that they need to look into all systems impacting the life of the child. Ada's comment signifies the comments of the majority

I believe it is important that teachers work with families because it is often the only way to know and understand the cultural background that might affect a child's behavior. It also helps create a sense of working together as a part of the support system to help the child succeed (*reflection week 8*).

Yorgo implies his realization of how important the Systems approach is by stating,

Teachers cannot work with families whom they don't understand. Therefore, Understanding self in relation to how our background has shaped who we are is essential to understanding families of our students and eventually our students (*reflection week 8*).

When teacher candidates were asked to conduct a functional behavior assessment of a child in their practicum class who displays challenging behavior socially, emotionally, or academically, they had no difficulty applying necessary procedures in the class (theory). However, they stated to have realized that understanding, educating, and meeting the needs of these students indeed extends to other environments and systems the students are surrounded with. Ellie stated;

We have no access to the parents of the student and she recently came to the care facility she is in now. It's been very difficult to acquire any information about Ashley. Even my host teacher seems to be so frustrated and helpless in understanding and managing her behaviors as I am. We are trying to get in touch with her relatives so we can collaborate with them, (*reflection week 11*).

One thing that seemed to scare teacher candidates was that they realized it takes great effort and extensive time and skills to utilize the resources available in all ecological systems to the highest extent possible in order to maximize their effectiveness in their practice. Fiona asks in the group discussion of week 7

How can we find the time to make home visits. We don't even know whether we will be welcomed by families of our students, it could be very dangerous to visit neighborhoods where we are not familiar with the culture (*focus group week 7*).

Paralleling Fiona's comment, Faith went on to say,

the environments our students come from may be very different from what we used to and this makes it even harder to reach and even scary for me (*focus group week 7*).

After an intense discussion about the possible danger different environments may pose, what could be done to prevent such danger, and critiquing the attitudinal problems of the society and how these impact their reactions, teacher candidates came to an agreement that such circumstances could be mediated by taking some preventive measures, and by being proactive, determinant, and positive. When Zeyna stated

We too have our own lives to attend. We cannot just carry on putting our efforts 24/7 into our jobs making home visits, trying to establish collaborative relationships among parties whom do not even care about each other in some cases (*focus group week 7*).

Phil immediately responded

Isn't it better to put some extra time in solving the problems in their own contexts rather than taking the problem home in your head and dealing with it even in your sleep? Putting the extra effort in, at first doesn't seem so profitable but later on really pays off. It makes your job much easier in the classroom (*focus group week 7*).

"What does it take to be a good teacher?" was a question asked by all the participants as they reflected while they compared the situations they faced in the field and reiterated on what they espoused from their program of study. Devotion and good will were the most frequently mentioned characteristics of a good teacher. Resourcefulness or being creative was also found to be very important in making a good teacher. Fred stated,

There were plenty of resources that weren't used effectively in the classroom. Teachers are using the computer in class to browse the newspapers rather than instructional purposes. Therefore it is not a matter of lacking the resources and tools but rather a matter of being creative in how we utilize the resources at our disposal, but also about the willingness to find ways to differentiate instruction even without any technology or other materials (*reflection week 12*).

Being open and critical were two other traits frequently mentioned in the narrative of the teachers. Georgia said,

... we are so comfortable with all we are accustomed to but uncomfortable with things that are new or different to us. Most of the time we don't even realize that we are judging people based on these fixed views of ours (*focus group week 9*).

Clearly, as teachers tried to reconceptualize their role as special education teachers, they also sought answers to their questions regarding how they should become in the future as they aspire to become the best.

3.3. The earlier is the better

All teacher candidates stated how pleased they were to have had the chance to be exposed to real students and instructional experiences in the field, through which they conferred to have added to their knowledge base, awareness about the real purpose of special education, and which helped them visualize the future for themselves as a professional in this field. At the beginning, some of the teachers were shocked by this exposition and thought this was the wrong profession for them. However, after 8–9 weeks in the field, the same teacher candidates stated to have come over their fears and hesitation about how this profession fits them. Olric, in his second weekly reflective journal, states:

I don't think I quitted another profession to be faced with such dissatisfaction and disappointment. I feel like I am totally lost and I know nothing about what should I do. I think I will quit this too. At least I know that I should quit because I shouldn't be harming any one because I am not fit for this task (teaching special education) (*reflection week 2*).

Later on, during the 13th week, Olric calls the researcher as his advisor to say "please disregard what I have written in my second reflective journal. I now feel so ashamed of being so scared and giving up on this noble profession." Likewise, most of the teachers stated that the experience made them stronger and helped them gain a sense of direction, thus great attitudinal shift was evident in the data progressively.

3.4. Striking a balance: is what we learn what we see?

Notable difference was detected between the opinions of the hosting teachers (data collected from the interviews with the host teachers) and the opinions of teacher candidates (data from observations). Practicing teachers identified barriers for effective inclusive practices as lack of resources, lack of education and knowledge of special education, and lack of interest of parents in collaboration. Whereas teacher candidates, after observing the environment and practices, reflected that it is indeed not about the resources available, but rather about the willingness of professionals to do something and about their creativity in utilizing the available resources. "... I haven't seen any projectors being used, or the internet being used for instructional purposes." stated the majority of teacher candidates. "... teachers expect made-ready to use materials to be purchased rather than making them." "... I don't think teachers would be more effective if they had more materials purchased for them." "most of the teachers don't see any point in working academic with their students, they don't put the extra effort into utilizing resources to make progress. They literally have given up on their students which decreases productivity." were frequently appearing comments in *focus group week 4* that signify the importance of the willingness and creativity of the teachers in being more effective.

Practicing teachers claimed that they are lacking the time to work with each child and to collaborate with other professionals involved in their education and the families of these students. However, teacher candidates stated to have observed that in many situations, teachers were only killing time and if they structured the time, they would be able to realize all the things they are blaming on the lack of time. Representing the thoughts of many others, Hannah goes on to say in her journal focus group week 4.

... my professor from the university visited to observe me in the classroom but came to see that nothing is taking place that day. When my professor talked about how this first week could have been allotted to conduct home visits in order to forge collaboration with families and increase student motivation for school attendance instead of waiting for the students to come, I realized how practicing teachers are avoiding the tasks that require more work and risk. Therefore, they are not using their time effectively.

Teacher candidates seemed to frequently question why practices manifest so differently than what they have been learning. Ignorance of the teachers was stated as a reason for this difference. *"most of the practicing teachers are not aware of many policies and the rights of stakeholders to take actions on certain issues, therefore, they are scared of taking risks and doing things for the betterment of the education."* stated most teachers with different wording during week-5 focus group discussion. While trying to empathize with practicing teachers, they also seem to blame a part of the problem on teachers for not doing enough to be more effective, asserting *"... but then, isn't it the responsibility of every teacher to keep up to date and make themselves aware of any thing that will make them more effective in their profession?"* Beth stated in her week-6 reflection.

... it's about working against the grain...everyone is taking the short cut and seems to be after how they can do less and how they can avoid risks...particularly in special education, everything is so personal, sensitive, and risky. As long as we have the ill fate, then we can say everything is too risky and I can do nothing.

Practicing teachers seemed to prefer these students to be instructed in separate environments and mostly with one-on-one instruction. These attitudes in a way also point to the fact that most teachers in practice do not support inclusion. As denoted in Haley's following excerpt from her week-13 reflection, most teacher candidates thought that the failure of inclusion was due to the low expectations, unwillingness, and lack of effort of the practicing teachers.

In the program, our professors always tell us that every individual can learn and that if teachers put the effort forward then success would come ... most of the teachers are doing nothing but providing basic daily care for their students. This is no special education and this is not the teacher I dreamed of becoming (week 13-reflection)

3.5. Are we ready for the challenge?

By the 14th week, when it came down to the question "do I have the power to start reform," all teachers somehow pointed to the fact that *"Individually I may not have the power to change the whole system but if I want change then I must start from somewhere, at least start from myself, and I should have faith in myself and my students."* Haley states *"Clearly, we are not recruiting and/or retaining enough competent individuals into the profession."* and continues on to say *"... coming from other professions with no special education background, they are not aware of many things and that's why they maintain these ill attitudes seeing their job as only providing daily care to these children."* (Week 14 reflection). These observations and thoughts of the pre-service teachers surfaced somehow in the narrative of the majority of participants.

"It is not as easy as it sounds! You may never be able to predict what may happen until it happens! We all have skewed thoughts about how we would respond to disability but unless we experience it in our lives we always will be ignorant to some extent, and it will be easy to judge others and blame them for what is going wrong in accordance to what we know to

be right. And everyone has their own right and is very hard to be able to see and sympathize with others' rights." Was a common conclusive thought shared by many teacher candidates in their week-14 reflections.

4. Discussion and implications for teacher preparation

Based on the emerged themes, it could be concluded that the Theory-to-Practice gap is real and does exist for our program and the field teacher candidates were exposed to. Being exposed to this reality made teacher candidates question their readiness, the proficiency of the hosting teachers in the field, and think critically in order to generate solutions for the existing problems to bridge theory to practice. The experiences, at the beginning, were shocking and scary for many. This, in itself, indicates that such expositions should be structured and the teachers should have the needed support and guidance to reach the positive outcomes. The well-structured exposition proved to have great impact on the readiness of teacher candidates broadening their repertoire of strategies, improving their self-confidence, improving their skills to collaborate and work with others, enabling them to critically determine malpractice, and develop a vision to overcome such possibilities in their future practice. The supportive and active role of the university instructors in creating such awareness and vigilance to pursue best practices are an essential element of best practices in teacher education programs (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). This study indicated that the instructor's nurturing nature, encouragement, and knowledge of curricular approaches in special education, all came together to provide the teacher candidates with the support they needed to succeed. However, follow-up studies that track the participant teachers in their practice should be conducted in order to document the impact of such preparation after they leave the teacher education program.

Although there were differences between hosting teachers' and pre-service teachers' perceptions of the current issues, teacher candidates stated to have learned great amount about teaching from the hosting teachers and from being exposed to the field. The experience helped teacher candidates visualize the theory better and helped them make a better sense of what has been talked about in their preparation program and helped them realize how felicitous their professional choice is and they came to appreciate the real essence and satisfaction which teaching will provide them in life.

Regardless of the fact that it was hard to face and confess their misconceptions and assumptions, towards the end of 14 the weeks, teacher candidates seemed to have felt easier about sharing their thoughts as a means of reflection and as a way to solve problem. Critically reviewing themselves in the context of their social networks and doing it out loud was something most of them hadn't done before. The more they reflected upon themselves, their social networks, and their upbringing, the better they came to see the connections between this background and their actions. This, in itself, implies that reflection should be an essential part of teacher preparation.

This study indicates that the difference between the way special education is practiced in the field and the way it is being taught in teacher preparation programs is huge and teacher candidates should be exposed to these realities earlier in the programs in a supported and controlled manner in order to increase the effectiveness of new teachers and to decrease their disappointment. Observing as an outsider, feeling safe and supported creates more enthusiastic teachers to become agents of change and to realize the much-needed school reform.

Good preparation does not only mean preparing teachers for best practices, but also preparing them for the unexpected and helping them gain the higher order skills, such as critical thinking, reflection, and problem-solving, to think about and come up with solutions for deviant situations. As Sylvia and Hutchinson (1985) concluded "Teacher motivation is based in the freedom to try new ideas, achievement of appropriate responsibility levels, and intrinsic work elements.... true job satisfaction is derived from the gratification of higher-order needs, "social relations, esteem, and actualization" rather than lower-order needs. Therefore, paralleling these assertions, this study confirms that the seeds of these higher order needs should be planted earlier in teacher education programs.

There are limitations that need to be noted for consideration in future research. First of all, even though it is not the goal of qualitative research to generalize, the studied sample may not be representative of all teacher candidates in all other teacher education programs. However, the results are shared in order to provide an example for a practice that proved to be effective. The study could be conducted with different samples at different institutions and even in different countries. Second, the cultural values and the structure of the education system, in which the studies to be conducted must be studied carefully, and their impact on teachers' perceptions and the ways they respond to issues must be considered.

Funding

The authors received no direct funding for this research.

Author details

Suad Sakallı Gümüş¹

E-mail: ssakalli@umail.iu.edu

¹ Faculty of Education, Department of Special Education, Mustafa Kemal University, Hatay, Turkey.

Citation information

Cite this article as: Learning to teach special education: A balancing act of assumptions, reality, and best practice, Suad Sakallı Gümüş, *Cogent Education* (2015), 2: 1055095.

References

- Ainscow, M., & Haile-Giorgis, M. (1998). *The education of children with special needs in Central and Eastern Europe: Barriers and opportunities* (Innocenti Occasional Paper, Economic and Social Policy Series No. 67). Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.
- Allsopp, D. H., De Marie, D., Alvarez-McHatton, P., & Doone, E. (2006). Bridging the gap between theory and practice: Connecting courses with field experience. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 2006, 19–35.
- Brantlinger, E., Jimenez, R., Klingner, J., Pugach, M., & Richardson, V. (2005). Qualitative studies in special education. *Exceptional Children*, 71, 195–207. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/001440290507100205>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1989). Ecological systems theory. *Annals of Child Development*, 6, 187–249.
- Cavkaytar, A., & Diken, I. H. (2007). *Constitution of the Republic of Turkey. Özel Eğitim Giriş* [Introduction to special education]. Ankara: Kök Yayıncılık. Retrieved from http://global.tbmm.gov.tr/docs/constitution_en.pdf
- Cresswell, J. W. (1997). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among the five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cruickshank, D., & Armaline, W. (1986). Field experiences in teacher education: Considerations and recommendations. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 37, 34–40. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/002248718603700307>
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *What matters most: A competent teacher for every child*. Retrieved from <http://www.kiva.net/~pdkind/darling.html>
- Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Thousand, J. (2003). What do special educators need to know and be prepared to do for inclusive schooling to work? *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children*, 26, 42–50. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/088840640302600105>
- Flores, M. A., & Day, C. (2006). Contexts which shape and reshape new teachers' identities: A multi-perspective study. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22, 219–232. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.09.002>
- Florian, L. (2008). Towards an inclusive pedagogy. In P. Hick, R. Kershner, & P. T. Farrell (Eds.), *Psychology for inclusive education: New directions in theory and practice* (pp. 38–51). London: Routledge.
- Gagne, R. (1985). *The conditions of learning* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Grisham, D. L., Berg, M., Jacob, v., & Mathison, C. (2002). Can a professional development school have a lasting impact on teachers' beliefs and practice? *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 29, 5–22.
- Howard, G. (1999) *Intelligence reframed. Multiple intelligences for the 21st century* (pp. 91–114). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Hutchinson, N. L., & Martin, A. K. (1999). Fostering inclusive beliefs and practices during preservice teacher education through communities of practice. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 22, 234–250.
- Ingersoll, R. M. (2001). Teacher turnover and teacher shortages: An organizational analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38, 499–534. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/00028312038003499>
- Korthagen, F. A., Loughran, J. J., & Russell, T. (2006). Developing fundamental principles for teacher education programs and practices. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22, 1020–1041. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.04.022>
- Levin, H. M., & Lockheed, M. E. (1993). *Effective schools in developing countries*. London: The Falmer Press (with the World Bank).
- Light, G., & Cox, R. (2005). *Learning & teaching in higher education: The reflective professional*. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.
- Llyod, C. (2000). Excellence for all children—false promises! The failure of current policy for education and implications for schooling in the 21st century. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 4, 133–151.
- Melnick, S. A., & Meister, D. G. (2008). A comparison of beginning and experienced teachers' concerns. *Educational Research Quarterly*, 31, 39–56.
- Merrill, M. D. (2009). First principles of instruction. In C. M. Reigeluth & A. Carr (Eds.), *Instructional design theories and models: Building a common knowledge base* (Vol. III, pp. 41–56). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Perkins, D. N., & Unger, C. (1999). Teaching and learning for understanding. In C. M. Reigeluth (Ed.), *Instructional design theories and models, Volume II: A new paradigm of instructional theory* (pp. 91–114). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Rock, T., & Levin, B. (2002). Collaborative action research projects: Enhancing preservice development in professional development schools. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 29, 7–21.
- Rouse, M. (2008). Developing inclusive practice: A role for teachers and teacher education? *Education in the North*, 16, 6–11.
- Ryndak, D. L., Jackson, L., & Billingsley, F. (1999–2000). Defining school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities: What do experts say? *Exceptionality*, 8, 101–116.
- Sakallı Gumus, S. (2008). *Preparing teachers for partnering with families: Examining the impact of a specifically designed curriculum on professionals*. Retrieved from <http://gradworks.umi.com/3331251.pdf>
- Sakallı Gumus, S., Humphries, L. A., & Buterai, G. (2010). Preparing special education teachers for family-professional partnership: The perspective of families. *Mustafa Kemal University Journal of Social Sciences Institute*, 7, 56–77.

Schulz, R. (2005). The practicum: More than practice. *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, 28, 147–169. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1602158>

Schwandt, T. A. (1997). Evaluation as practical hermeneutics. *Evaluation*, 3, 69–83. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/135638909700300105>

Sylvia, R. D., & Hutchinson, T. (1985). What makes Ms. Johnson teach? A study of teacher motivation. *Human Relations*, 38, 841–856. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/001872678503800902>

Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE). (2011). *Strengthening special education project*. Retrieved from <http://ozegep.meb.gov.tr/eng/>

UNESCO. (2005). *Children out of school: Measuring exclusion from primary education*. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

UNICEF. (2000) *Dakar framework for action. Education for all: Meeting our collective commitments*. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121147e.pdf>

Villa, R. A., Thousand, J. S., & Chapple, J. W. (2000). Preparing educators to implement inclusive practices. In R. A. Villa & J. S. Thousand (Eds.), *Restructuring for caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together* (2nd ed., pp. 531–557). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Wideen, M., Mayer-Smith, J., & Moon, B. (1998). A critical analysis of the research on learning to teach: Making the case for an ecological perspective on inquiry. *Review of Educational Research*, 68, 130–178. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/00346543068002130>

Wiggin, M. (2004). Critical realism as a philosophy and social theory in information science? *Journal of Documentation*, 61, 11–22.

Yost, D. S. (2006). Reflection and self-efficacy: Enhancing the retention of qualified teachers from a teacher education perspective. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 33, 59–74.

Yüksel, I. (2012). The current developments in teacher education in Turkey on the threshold of European union. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2, 49.

Zeichner, K. M. (1980). Myths and realities: Field-based experiences in preservice teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 31, 45–49, 51–55. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/002248718003100620>

Appendix A. Demographics of study participants

No.	Pre-service teacher			Hosting teacher			
	Age	Gender	Level of education	Age	Gender	Years of experience	Setting
1	18	M	Undergraduate	32	F	10	Self-contained class
2	18	F	Undergraduate	37	F	15	Inclusive class
3	20	M	Undergraduate	35	F	12	Self-contained class
4	19	F	Undergraduate	44	M	22	Inclusive class
5	18	F	Undergraduate	51	F	26	Self-contained class
6	20	F	Undergraduate	47	F	25	Inclusive class
7	18	F	Undergraduate	45	F	22	Self-contained class
8	19	M	Undergraduate	50	F	25	Self-contained class
9	19	M	Undergraduate	50	M	24	Inclusive class
10	18	F	Undergraduate	43	F	20	Self-contained class
11	18	F	Undergraduate	46	F	22	Self-contained class
12	20	F	Undergraduate	48	F	24	Self-contained class
13	18	M	Undergraduate	41	F	17	Inclusive class
14	19	F	Undergraduate	54	F	26	Inclusive class
15	18	M	Undergraduate	32	M	8	Self-contained class
16	22	F	Undergraduate	35	F	10	Self-contained class
17	18	F	Undergraduate	39	M	12	Inclusive class
18	18	F	Undergraduate	45	F	22	Self-contained class
19	19	F	Undergraduate	37	F	15	Inclusive class
20	18	F	Undergraduate	42	F	15	Self-contained class
21	18	M	Undergraduate	41	F	18	Inclusive class
22	19	M	Undergraduate	46	F	21	Inclusive class
23	19	F	Undergraduate	50	F	25	Self-contained class
24	18	F	Undergraduate	52	F	26	Self-contained class

(Continued)

Appendix A (Continued)

No.	Pre-service teacher			Hosting teacher			
	Age	Gender	Level of education	Age	Gender	Years of experience	Setting
25	19	M	Undergraduate	29	F	7	Self-contained class
26	19	F	Undergraduate	34	F	10	Self-contained class
27	19	F	Undergraduate	32	F	11	Inclusive class
28	18	M	Undergraduate	37	F	15	Self-contained class
29	20	M	Undergraduate	45	F	23	Self-contained class
30	18	M	Undergraduate	43	F	22	Inclusive class
31	19	M	Undergraduate	44	M	22	Self-contained class
32	21	M	Undergraduate	34	F	11	Self-contained class



© 2015 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format

Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.

You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions

You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



Cogent Education (ISSN: 2331-186X) is published by Cogent OA, part of Taylor & Francis Group.

Publishing with Cogent OA ensures:

- Immediate, universal access to your article on publication
- High visibility and discoverability via the Cogent OA website as well as Taylor & Francis Online
- Download and citation statistics for your article
- Rapid online publication
- Input from, and dialog with, expert editors and editorial boards
- Retention of full copyright of your article
- Guaranteed legacy preservation of your article
- Discounts and waivers for authors in developing regions

Submit your manuscript to a Cogent OA journal at www.CogentOA.com

