

DDP EFL Student Teachers' Perceptions About the Qualities of a Professional Teacher

Melike Bekereci

Res. Asst. PhD Cand., Faculty of Education, Middle East Technical University, Turkey

Abstract

This study explores how EFL student teachers of an undergraduate dual diploma program describe the qualities of a professional teacher after spending a year in their partner university in the United States, and after experiencing international and local practice teaching contexts. As a case study, the data were obtained through in-depth interviews, student teachers' observation journals, and a survey. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, student teachers' observation journals were gathered on a weekly basis. As a supplementary tool, International Survey (TALIS) was administered to all participants. The collected data suggested that study abroad and international short-term fieldwork experience made contributions to their perceptions about the ideal teacher thanks to broadening their worldviews about multiculturalism and diversity, and improving their personal skills, including human relation and communication skills. As a result of these experiences, the prospective teachers re-shaped their perceptions and attributed new features indicating interpersonal skills to the image of a professional teacher. The study also revealed that after returning to Turkey and completing Practice Teaching course in one of the cooperating schools, their perceptions were re-shaped again under the influence of experiencing a real teaching context with the same students for a long time. They indicated that while international fieldwork and study abroad experience showed them being fluent in English, patient, eager to raise human beings, and being able to address individual differences in a classroom, thanks to local practice teaching experience, they added new features to them, including love of teaching, motivating students for life-long learning, being a facilitator to help them find their own path, attending to the learner, getting along with students within the framework of respect, kindness and temperateness, dealing with disruptive behaviors and accomplishing classroom management by developing techniques to create a safe and pleasant learning environment for students.

Keywords: professional teacher, practicum, study abroad, EFL student teachers, dual diploma program

1. Introduction

As the dominance of English increased the demand for English teaching professionals, it is a prominent issue to have qualified professionals in learning and teaching field. Even though English language teaching is a huge field with its a great number of graduates and professionals, "it seems to fall far short of meeting the needs generated from the countries' rapid developments in the economy, science, and technology, and from increasing contact with the outside world" (Qin, 1999, p. 24). To this end, the importance of increased need for qualified English teaching professionals cannot be overemphasized. Within a realistic approach, theoretically and practically, no teacher is 'ideal'. To this end, the concept of ideal teacher may refer to the teacher who achieves a level of perfection in his/her job. In line with this claim, Harris & Sass (2009) define three main categories of teachers: 1) teachers those that have natural talent, 2) teachers those who fulfill vocational requirements but do not have the professional skills, and 3) teachers those that are not appropriate for this profession, but choose and sustain this job because of various reasons. For educational research, these categories may serve as the starting point of for studying teachers' affective, cognitive and behavioral differences, since teachers' personal beliefs and teaching acts shape their way of integrating to the teaching profession. From this perspective, it is beyond a doubt that teachers' actions influence their students, since they construct intellectual and emotional affinity. To this end, the quality of teachers has a larger impact on students than the quality of the curriculum, the teaching methods, the school building or the role of parents (Hattie, 2009). In order to identify specific qualities, which are connected to the teaching profession, the term 'educational professional' is used to "indicate and emphasize the prestige and status of the teacher" (Snoek, 2009, p.2). As a result of this attempt, in the past century, the concepts of 'professional teacher' and 'professionalism in teaching'

have been used to shift perspectives in the field (Evetts, 2006). Since teachers start to shape or re-shape their perceptions about the teaching profession during the practicum by experiencing educational contexts and their realities (Ten Dam & Blom, 2006), practice teaching plays a key role in helping student teachers and in-service teachers while developing and improving their teaching practices. In a similar vein, the contribution of study abroad programs to teachers' professional development and their understanding of professionalism have been covered within the scope of increasing cultural awareness and interpersonal skills, improving teaching skills, and minimizing the personal barriers. To this end, it is clear that student teachers' practice teaching and study abroad experiences are worthy of being studied in order to gain an in-depth understanding of student teachers' perceptions about the qualities of a professional teacher, who have study abroad experiences and attend to practice teaching as future teachers.

2. Literature Review

Barr (1995) conducted a study with six teachers from University of Waikato, New Zealand, who took part in an international student teacher exchange program in the United States. The researcher conducted interviews with the participants in order to learn their perceptions about the United States education system and whether or not their educational perspectives had been changed after attending to this program. While three of the participants were senior year students, the rest of them were graduates and working as teachers. The study revealed two important results. Firstly, they indicated that exchange would have been more effective if they had had more teaching practice experiences in New Zealand, since these experiences provide student teachers to integrate theory into practice. Secondly, the study reveals that opportunity to travel to the United States attracted students to enroll in the program, since all of the participants indicated that they aimed to experience two different education systems, go overseas and take the chance to live in a multi-cultural environment, which they found a big opportunity to develop awareness about individual differences, diversity and multiculturalism. From the advantages of international practicum perspective, Sahin (2008) conducted an exploratory study exploring the impact of international teaching experience on the personal and professional development of student teachers in Turkey. With the help of a survey for mentor teachers and student teachers and an interview conducted with only student teachers, the researcher found that the main contributions of international experience were personal and professional development along with increasing self-confidence, the opportunity to live in different cultures, and compare the U.S. and Turkey education systems. In terms of student teachers' personal development, it was found that thanks to these experiences, participants improved their interpersonal skills and perceptions of responsibility. Another contribution of these experiences was that they gained great insights into multiculturalism, which facilitated cultural awareness and respect to diversity. It was also revealed that student teachers made progress in the development of their self-motivation, self-confidence, and interaction with other individuals. Another similar study conducted by Ozek (2009) in a Turkish context in order to shed light on how international teaching experiences made an impact on five student teachers in terms of educational philosophies and their expectations from the profession. The researcher administered two questionnaires before and after their practicum and collected their journals. The study found that the student teachers became more aware of cultural and global aspects during the overseas teaching experience. This experience also helped them improve their self-confidence. Moreover, their international experiences re-shaped their perspectives about the integration of diverse teaching approaches and utilizing the technology in classrooms and using authentic classroom materials. In a similar vein, a study was carried out by Pence & Macgillivray (2008) in order to examine the effect of international fieldwork experience on student teachers personal and professional development. They collected the relevant data by making use of students' journals, focus group interviews with supervisors, keeping observation notes, students' reflections at the end of the experience, and employing a questionnaire. It was found that all student teachers reported personal and professional changes emerging from the short-term international experience. The study also revealed that these experiences helped them improve their self-confidence, provided them an opportunity to see language differences and teaching for diversity.

A similar study conducted by Kabilan (2013) in order to explore six Malaysian student teachers' overseas fieldwork experience in Maldives. The data were collected through questionnaires and reflective journals. The study revealed that student teachers benefitted from the program in terms of increasing confidence in communication skills, improving interpersonal skills, and gaining a new perspective about education and culture. Examining 168 Kenyan and 189 American pre-service teachers through a cross-sectional survey research design, Gibson & Dembo (1984) found that the participants ended up with higher self-efficacy, motivation, and tendency to praise students more. Similarly, Cushner & Mahon (2002) investigated 50 American pre-service teachers who had study abroad and fieldwork experience running from 8 to 15 weeks in Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand. The data were collected through five types of open-ended questions. The study revealed that overseas experience helped them develop personal, professional and global perspectives through increased

sense of cultural awareness, global-mindedness and acceptance of cultural diversity. From the perspective of preparing culturally responsive teachers, Marx & Moss (2011) conducted a case study with one pre-service teacher, who was enrolled in a teacher education study abroad program. Data were collected through observations and five in-depth interviews. The first one was conducted prior to her departure, while three of them were conducted periodically. The last one was conducted after completing the program. The results revealed that participation in the program positively influenced her intercultural development and interpersonal skills, which were found very crucial for professional life in terms of working with students coming from different backgrounds and developing consciousness about individual differences.

As practicum is of vital importance for student teachers, Zeichner (2010) draws attention to the fact that practicum plays a crucial role in terms of enabling prospective teachers observe their mentor teachers' performances and rethink their own perceptions of professionalism. Similar to these explanations, Yazan (2015) explored five ESOL teacher candidates' professional learning experiences during practicum and the effects on their professional understanding. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and the results revealed that practicum re-shaped their insights about the teaching profession and school culture, which provided them 'professional acclimatization'. In addition, the study also found that mentor teachers' and supervisors' support allowed them to scaffold their professional learning. In Turkish context, Şimşek (2014) examined twenty-six English language pre-service teachers' professional perceptions before and after practicum. This qualitative study made use of metaphor analysis as a data collection tool. It was found that participants' conventional teacher images decreased, while modern, humanistic and participatory view of language teaching was enhanced. The study put forward that they initially regarded an ideal teacher as the 'authority' who taught subject knowledge and monitored students. After the practicum, they believed that discipline and behavior problems could only be prevented through understanding individual differences and establishing a good relationship with students.

Similar to Şimşek's (2014) study, Yuan & Lee (2014) conducted a research in order to examine three student teachers' perception changes during their practicum. The data were collected twice, i.e. pre-practicum and post-practicum in China. This study made use of interviews, observations and students' reflective journals as data collection tools. The results revealed that participants' perceptions were re-shaped during practicum. Previously they perceived the teacher as the 'authority' in the class. On the other hand, at the end of the practicum, they mentioned that they questioned their pre-perceptions and noticed that a teacher is not all knowing and should criticize him/herself rather than hiding his/her imperfections. Likewise, Oruç (2013) concentrated on a teacher trainee during her teaching practicum. The researcher collected the relevant data through interviews and reflective journals. The study revealed that her perceptions about classroom discipline and disruptive behaviors have changed during the practicum as a result of observing a professional teacher and developing strategies to cope with them. In addition, she reported that after sharing the same environment with her 'future colleagues', she began to feel like she is one of them, which helped her involve in a real professional group and re-shape her perceptions about the profession.

According to Fischl & Sagy (2005), there are two main elements that might shape or re-shape student teachers' images of a professional teacher. While the first one is past teachers who are seen as 'role models', the second one is the student teachers' 'self-images' as learners. Thus, before attending to teacher education programs, student teachers' perceptions about the teaching profession and the ideal teacher have been already shaped, but they are updated especially under the influence of their experiences lived during the practicum. From this perspective, Seymen (2012) conducted a qualitative study with six student teachers. The data were collected through interviews and in-class observations before and after the participants' practice teaching in order to identify the impact of this experience on their perceptions about the ideal teacher. The study revealed that participants defined the required qualities of an ideal teacher in the first interview as facilitator, controller, resource of information and a guide for students to help them discover themselves. The second interview showed that the qualities of an ideal teacher, which were mentioned during the first interviews, did not change after the practicum. According to the participants, the underlying reason for this situation was the participants' belief that their perceptions could change only with experience. Besides, the study revealed that student teachers expected to have good relationships with students, which implied that they cared about their communication with their students. Similarly, Rusu et al. (2011) conducted a study conducted a case study with a group of 77 students from two faculties in order to obtain their perceptions about the ideal teacher. The researchers made use of students' essays as a data collection tool. According to the participants, the features of an ideal teacher can be listed from most important to least important as follows: human relation skills, fair assessment, subject matter knowledge, facilitator of students' intellectual development, respectful, dynamic lecturer, and good listener. Examining the qualities of an ideal teacher, Telli et al. (2008) conducted a study with 21 teachers and 276 students by making use of an open-ended questionnaire and interviews. The aim of the study was describing the

characteristics of an ideal teacher from an interpersonal point of view. The researchers found that students and teachers described the ideal teacher as a person who guides students, motivates and encourages them, gives confidence, has a tendency to build positive relationships with them, and earns respect from students with the help of good communication skills.

Devine et al. (2013) conducted a mixed methodological study in order to examine teacher beliefs and practices about their teaching within the framework of the concept of good teaching. The study made use of observations, a survey and interviews to collect the data from both students and teachers. The study revealed that the good teacher has a passion for teaching and learning, and should be socially and morally aware in terms of being responsible of raising children and young people. In addition, the study put forward that an ideal teacher is a person who is an active learner and has higher-order thinking skills, which can be summarized as being a reflective practitioner. Besides, the participants defined an ideal teacher as a good manager of the classroom. Finally, according to the study, an ideal teacher has a love for children and young people, which provide him/her a genuine desire to pursue teaching as a career. In a similar vein, examining both students' and teachers' perceptions about the characteristics of a good teacher by making use of questionnaires and open-ended questions, Bullock (2015) found that students associated a good teacher with the following characteristics: technological skills, content knowledge, and attending to learners. Apart from these skills, they also pointed out the personality traits of a good teacher as follows: helpful, kind, funny and positive. Moreover, according to students, a good teacher is a person who has good relationships with his/her students with the help of creating a peaceful environment, listening to them, praising them, being available to listen to them when they need him/her, being respectful and responsible, and trusting his/her students that they will do their best in exams/tests. On the other hand, according to teachers, a good teacher is a person who is always punctual, prepared, organized, and flexible with changes, knowledgeable about the content and a life-long learner. Apart from that, they defined a good teacher as creative, be open to try new things, cheerful, and be able to make his/her students willing to learn more.

3. The Context of the Study

This study was conducted in a dual diploma program (DDP), which is an undergraduate program in which students spend one or two years of their undergraduate education at a campus of the State University of New York (SUNY), USA and spend the rest in partner Turkish universities. Middle East Technical University Department of Foreign Language Education in collaboration with the State University of New York at New Paltz is offering a dual diploma undergraduate program in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and Liberal Studies. The four-year program in TEFL- Liberal Studies includes full-time enrolment for six semesters at METU, and two semesters and two summer terms at SUNY- New Paltz. While students spend their first, second and fourth years at METU, third year students study at SUNY-New Paltz campus, where they also attend two summer sessions. In SUNY-New Paltz, TEFL students take Field Experience Course offered by School of Education. After returning to Turkey, senior year students take Practice Teaching Course which offers students an opportunity to involve in planning lessons, adapting and developing materials, utilizing their lesson plans and materials, and having teaching experiences in a real classroom.

4. Aim of the Study

This study may reveal important results regarding DDP student teachers' perception changes about the qualities of a professional teacher after experiencing study abroad and practice teaching experiences. In addition, this study offers an investigation of DDP EFL student teachers' perceptions about the essential qualities of a professional teacher under the influence of their study abroad and practice teaching experiences. Finally, the implications of this study may raise the awareness of the teacher educators who are responsible for training prospective teachers as language professionals. To achieve these aims, this study attempts to find answers to the following research questions: 1. What is the role of study abroad experience in shaping EFL student teachers' perceptions about the qualities of a professional teacher?, 2. How does practice teaching experience make an impact on EFL student teachers' pre-existing perceptions of the qualities of a professional teacher?

5. Methodology

5.1 Participants

Five senior year students studying in the METU-SUNY New Paltz Dual Diploma Program in Liberal Studies and English Language Teaching were the participants in this study. These five students were regular students of the program, which

means they went to the USA at the end of their second year and spent one year at New Paltz campus experiencing Fieldwork at a state school in the United States. Then, they returned to Turkey to complete the program as senior students and enrolled Practice Teaching course in their final semester at METU.

5.2 Data Collection Tools

In this study, the relevant data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document review and a survey. The participants were asked questions from various aspects of their perceptions about the teaching profession, future plans, practicum experiences and their opinions about the qualities of a professional teacher. The first interview was conducted at the very beginning of the semester in order to have an understanding about participants' pre-existing beliefs on the teaching profession and the qualities of a professional teacher. The second interview was conducted at the end of the semester after the participants completing Practice Teaching course. The aim of the second interview was gaining insights into effect of practicum experience on their perceptions about the teaching profession and qualities of a professional teacher. The first and the second interviews are mostly comprised of the same questions in order to see whether practice teaching experience had an impact on their pre-existing beliefs about the teaching profession and the idea of professionalism. After conducting these two interviews, the researcher organized the third individual meeting with the participants in order to ask them the underlying reasons for changing or not changing their answers in the second interview. As a supplementary data collection tool, the study benefitted from participants' observation journals. They were not specifically produced for this research study, but all of them were written in the scope of Practice Teaching course on a weekly basis. Additionally, The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) was administered to all participants. Since the survey is designed for in-service teachers, the researcher made use of only its two sections, which are related to teachers' personal beliefs on teaching and learning, and professional development needs.

5.3 Data Analysis

In this study, for the analysis of semi-structured interviews, the analysis method suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994) was used. Firstly, the audio-recorded semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim. After highlighting the important statements in order to eliminate the mass of unconnected data, the researcher developed a system to retrieve codes and themes from the raw data, which were early labels of data, including little inferences and interpretations of the researcher. This stage enabled the researcher to group similar kinds of information to form the categories. For the analysis of participants' observation journals, the researcher read and re-read reports in order to mark the significant statements. Finally, the data obtained from the survey were analyzed through SPSS program and descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviation were indicated.

6. Results and Discussion

The purpose of the first question was to investigate the perceptions of DDP EFL student teachers holding about the qualities of a professional teacher before taking the practicum in Turkey. During the first interviews, all participants appreciate to a teacher as the most significant quality the human relation skills. According to them, teachers' positive traits are of vital importance to be a professional. The positive traits mentioned during the first interviews can be summarized as being establishing a transparent relation with students, leaving your personal life at the door, taking the responsibility of students' way of being, friendly, sympathetic, and knowing the students' psychology in order to address individual differences and diversity. The study also reveals that being patient and temperate are the other significant personal traits that attributed to a professional teacher. In this study, as the personality traits, including communication competencies and human relation skills, were mentioned to define the professional teacher, these results are aligned with Bullock's (2015) and Telli et al.'s (2008)' studies, which emphasized that an ideal teacher guides students, motivates and encourages them, gives confidence with the help of building positive relationships with them, and earns respect from students by making use of good communication skills.

As it is extracted from the participants' statements, student teachers began to shape their perceptions about professionalism under the influence of their studentship memories and apprenticeship of observation experiences in the United States. According to the participants, living and studying in multicultural environment for a time might increase awareness for appreciating individual differences and help them develop required abilities for addressing all types of students in the classroom. The similar results were reported in Ozek's (2009) and Sahin's (2008) studies, which emphasized the contribution of study abroad experiences to student teachers' awareness of cultural and global aspects of teaching. In

addition, Pence & Macgillivray's (2008) study yielded the similar result, which indicated study abroad and international fieldwork experiences helped teachers improve their self-confidence, provided them an opportunity to see language differences and teaching for diversity. Since Barr's (1999) study revealed that experiencing two different education systems, going overseas and taking the chance to live in a multi-cultural environment were big opportunities to develop awareness about individual differences, diversity and multiculturalism.

As the participants implied that living in an English-speaking country for fourteen months made great contributions to them about communication skills, engagement in American culture, fluency, and the importance of student-centered education system, it is in line with Kabilan's (2013) study which found the advantages of study abroad experiences for prospective teachers as having new worldviews, increasing confidence in communication skills, improving interpersonal skills, and gaining a new perspective about education and culture. In line with this study, Marx & Moss (2011), Gibson & Dembo (1984) and Cushner & Mahon (2002) yielded similar results emphasizing the significance of study abroad and international fieldwork programs to train culturally responsive teachers. Overall, these results show that as the participants of this study were dual diploma students, they experienced two different educational contexts, had an opportunity to study and make observations in multicultural classes. In that sense, these experiences might have an impact of their perceptions about the qualities of a professional teacher, which they implied mostly personal traits and their experiences lived during their study abroad education. Additionally, the first interviews revealed that student teachers' images of an ideal teacher were initially shaped during their primary and high school years. This result is in line with Fischl & Sagy's (2005) claims.

In the middle of the semester, while the participants' of this study was continuing their practice teaching course in Turkey, a survey was administrated in order to check whether their perceptions about the qualities of a professional teacher changed or not. The survey indicated that all participants agreed upon the following qualities that a teacher must have: deciding on the most effective activities, facilitating students' own inquiry, helping students find their own paths, providing clear and correct instruction for students' achievements. As it is clearly drawn that after involving in a real teaching environment with real students for a long time, participants' perceptions about the required qualities were slightly changed. They began to mention being able to provide efficient instruction, being facilitator for students' personal and academic developments and course design. These results are in line with Seymen's (2012) results, which emphasized that student teachers perceive a professional teacher who is facilitator, controller, resource of information and a guide for students to help them discover themselves. Similarly, as Oruç's (2013) and Yuan & Lee's (2014) indicate that practicum experiences play a crucial role in re-shaping student teachers' perceptions, these studies put similar results with the current study. Interestingly, the survey showed that according to participants, student assessment practices is not of vital importance for professional development needs. This result is not in line with Rusu et al.'s (2011) findings emphasizing the fact that student teachers attributed the ability to employ fair assessment to the ideal teacher. Moreover, the participants did not mention even a sentence about student assessment during the interviews and their observation reports. This result might derived from the fact that they had very limited or no assessment experience during their fieldwork and practice teaching course, which is not enough to make any claims about this issue.

During the Spring semester, participants' observation reports, which were written in the scope of Practice Teaching course, were collected and read to find an answer for the second research question. According to these reports, after experiencing teaching practice and observing mentor teachers for a long time, the participants realized that teachers should praise and encourage students by providing them constructive feedback. In addition, they mentioned that their perceptions have changed about the role of the teacher in the classroom. Participants stated that teachers should not be seen as an authority figure, but a guide to help students find their paths and a manager to provide students a safe and pleasant learning environment. They also indicated that using communication skills is the best way in order to deal with students' disruptive behaviors during the lesson. In addition, participants indicated that teachers should be aware of students' individual differences while trying to enhance their involvement in the lesson and try to motivate them by praising their strengths while finding solutions for their weaknesses. These results are in line with Gibson & Dembo's (1984) findings. It is crystal clear that student teachers' perceptions about the qualities of a professional teacher changed after experiencing practicum in Turkey. After completing their teaching practice, a second interview was conducted with them. These interviews showed that after being involved in a real teaching community and a lively classroom environment in the cooperating school, participants mentioned that a professional teacher should facilitate students' intellectual development. According to participants, a professional teacher is the one who knows how to transfer his/her knowledge to the students in order to stimulate their intellectual development. This result is in line with Rusu et al.'s (2011) one of the findings, which emphasizes that the role of the ideal teacher is enhancing students' intellectual profundity. In addition, the participants mentioned that

besides subject matter knowledge, material development and getting along with the students are the features of a professional teacher. Besides, according to their after teaching practice opinions, an ideal teacher should love his/her job and being open to innovations in order to find the necessary motivation to develop himself/herself professionally. This result aligns with Devine et al.'s (2013) findings, which states that an ideal teacher has a love for children and young people, which provide him/her a genuine desire to pursue teaching as a career. The underlying changes of participants' perceptions might derived from the fact that practicum is a process to have opportunities for being involved in a real teaching community and observing real classroom facts, having a real teaching experience and getting in touch with the same students for a long time in a real learning context. The participants indicated that thanks to practicum, they learnt to take students' desires and expectations from them to forefront and re-shaped their perceptions about the teaching profession and teacher images. In line with these results, Yazan (2015) and Zeichner (2010) put the similar results in their studies in terms of implying the fact that practicum plays a crucial role in terms of enabling prospective teachers observe their mentor teachers' performances and rethink their own perceptions of professionalism.

7. Conclusion

This qualitative case study explored DDP EFL student teachers' perceptions about the qualities of a professional teacher and the effects of study abroad and local practice teaching experiences on shaping or re-shaping their perceptions. This study may provide important results for student teachers and teacher educators. Firstly, as teaching practicum is a critical period of prospective teachers' life in terms of shaping their decisions about their career path and reshaping their perceptions about teaching profession, providing them an efficient practice teaching experience to is of vital importance. These experiences help student teachers enter the profession more confident and well prepared. Secondly, this study also indicates that study abroad and especially international fieldwork experience play a key role in training culturally responsive teachers for English language teaching field. In that sense, more attention should be attached to fieldwork in terms of increasing the duration of this experience, which may provide them to spend more time in a multicultural environment and have more teaching experiences in a diverse classroom. It is clear that these experiences may make great contributions to prospective teachers' for addressing to individual differences and being able to design courses for different student profiles.

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