

The Structure and the Applications of Practical Activities in the Pre-School Teacher Training Program in the Open Education Faculty at Anadolu University in Turkey

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Distance education is used for teacher training at different levels and fields in Turkey as well. Launched in 2000-2001 academic year and still applied by Anadolu University, "Pre-School Teacher Training Program" is one of those programs. This program includes both theoretical and practical courses. There are two different practical courses in this program. One of them is "Practice in Preschool Education" in the third class and the other is "Teaching Practice" in the fourth class. Students practice as a full time or two half time in a week, totally 24 weeks in "Practice in Preschool Education" course. They practice as a full time or two half time in a week, totally 14 weeks in "Teaching Practice" course. Carried out with 7569 students throughout Turkey in 2004-2005 academic year, practice teaching is administered along with certain structural and functional guidelines. Practice teaching has to be planned and held carefully, and institutions and individuals taking part in the application have to collaborate closely to conduct the program effectively throughout Turkey. The purpose of this paper is to explain the structure and the applications of the practical activities in the Pre-School Teacher Training Program at Anadolu University, Eskişehir, Turkey.

Keywords: Distance education, teacher training, practice teaching of pre-school education.

1. Introduction

Today, distance education approach is implemented in many countries through programs at different levels and types for various purposes in teacher training (Özer, 1991, p. 73). Programs at distance education are used to train the teachers who have different backgrounds and who are at different levels. While some programs are designed for the pre-service training of teachers, some programs are designed for the newly recruited teachers, and some programs are designed for the continual development of experienced and qualified teachers who have been working for years (Perraton, 1993). Some studies show that distance trained teachers can be as good as, and in some cases, better than the more conventionally trained teachers. And there is some evidence that distance based programmes are less effective in changing trainee attitudes, than more the conventionally designed programmes (Yates, 2000).

Studies indicate that the teachers who have a wide range of teaching skills carry out a more effective teaching than those who have a limited number of teaching skills. Therefore, teaching practices must be conducted at teacher training since educational knowledge can only be put into effect through practice (Robinson, 1996). The practices provide teacher candidates with an opportunity to know the profession they are being prepared and enable them to face the real life situations.

Most of the learning in distance education occurs independently from the existence of teachers depending on the previously prepared teaching instruments (Evans, 1994, p.16). In other words, majority of the competence, which is a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will be gained by students, can only be provided by teaching instruments. For the teacher candidates studying through distance education, the ability of putting theoretical knowledge into practice and having positive attitudes towards teaching profession depend undoubtedly on carrying out high quality teaching practices. For this reason, practical activities play a strategic role in teacher training programs. In this respect, teaching practices in distance education are required to be planned and conducted seriously.

Five basic models were determined concerning the administration and supervision of teaching practices to be conducted in teacher training through distance education (Perraton, 2003).

Table 1: *The models used in the arrangement of the teaching practices*

Model	Examples
No practicum offered at all	Certificate in Guidance, IGNOU, (India)
College-based micro-teaching	Belize Teacher Training College
Classroom-based practicum as a separate block in a course, usually placed after academic blocks.	Diploma in Education, IGNOU, (India)
Classroom-based practicum supervised by visiting staff from college or ministry	Zimbabwe ZINTEC Project
Classroom-based practicum under the guidance of a mentor within the school	Open University (Britain) Postgraduate Certificate of Education

As in the first model, in some programs, a formal structure may not have been established for the supervision and evaluation of the program. In other cases, where programmes are aimed at experienced teachers, there is no formal practical element and therefore no need for a structure to supervise or assess it. In the second model, practical activities cover only the microteaching carried out in the college. Third model offers teaching practice as a separate block of classroom-based teaching. In this model, students spend blocks of time working in a conventional college and blocks studying at a distance while they are working in school. In the fourth model, candidates follow a course while they are teaching and are visited, from time to time, by a supervisor from the college or from some other part of the teaching service. This supervisory role is often given to school inspector. Finally in the fifth model, school-based teaching is an integral part of the course, interspersed and often closely integrated with the theoretical units and, is supervised by a school-based monitor. The university undertook the job of briefing and training mentors, who were regular members of the staff of schools throughout the country, and paid them a fee which was a substantial proportion of the total expenditure on the course (UNESCO, 2002).

Knowledge and understanding is easier for a distance education provider to assess than practice and performance. Assessment of a student's pedagogical skills, the outcomes, is difficult for distance educators to do alone since it needs first-hand observation and authentication (Robinson, 1996).

Anadolu University Faculty of Open Education, Undergraduate Program for Pre-school Teacher Training (UPPTT)

In Turkey, schooling ratio was 9.8 % during 1999-2000 academic year, and only a 10 % of 2.6 million pre-school children were able to benefit from institutional education. In other words, schooling ratio in Turkey is far behind the level of developed countries. In addition, the number of pre-school teachers who will enlarge the ratio of schooling is fairly limited. Our country needs 35.000 teachers to achieve its goals. However, it is not possible to train such a huge number of teachers through conventional education in a short time (Anadolu University, 2002).

Basic Features of the Program and Conditions of Acceptance: Undergraduate Program for Pre-school Teacher Training (UPPTT) is the equivalent of all Undergraduate Pre-school Teacher Training Programs run under education faculties providing conventional education in Turkey, and is completely carried out via distance education (www.anadolu.edu.tr, 2002). Only the graduates of departments such as Child Development, Child Development and Education, and Child Development and Nurture of Girls Vocational High Schools can be candidates for Undergraduate Pre-school Teacher Training Program. In addition, these candidates have to take the required score from the central college exam (OSYS). Other students graduated from different departments of different high schools are not accepted to the program (Anadolu University, 2002). The number of students registered to the program according to educational years are as follows: 4754 students in 2000-2001, 8285 students in 2001-2002, 2976 students in 2002-

2003, 2000 students in 2003-2004, and 2000 students in 2004-2005; totally reaching 20.015 students. The number of students that can study at this program was limited to 2000 in 2003-2004 academic year. First graduates finished the program in 2003-2004, and so far 7786 students have completed the program. At the moment, there are 14229 official students of the program.

The Aim of the Program: The main purpose of (UPPTT) is to contribute to the training of pre-school teachers that Turkey needs without making a concession on the quality of education, and with the required costs, number, and quality. Students completing their four-year undergraduate training and practices successfully are qualified to receive "BA Degree as Pre-school Teachers". These graduates are appointed by the Ministry of Education appropriately (Anadolu University, 2006).

The Content of the Program: The program includes courses on *professional knowledge on teaching, field knowledge, and general culture*. The courses in the first year focus on world knowledge; whereas, the ones in the last year are generally directed towards field knowledge. Courses about professional knowledge on teaching cover entire training period (four years) of the program. The theoretical courses are conducted through distance education; practice courses are conducted through face-to face education.

The Educational Media of the program: The program consists of *printed materials, television programs, and academic counseling services*. Printed materials (course books and guidebooks) are written by the subject area experts under the supervision of an editor. All printed materials are prepared in a way that provides opportunities of self-learning and complies with the principles of distance education. Each unit in a course book consists of goals, content, instructions, text, summary, comprehension questions and bibliography. Within the scope of the program, 23 books were written. Moreover, in order to support the printed materials, 2-6 television programs for each course and a total of 123 programs were filmed. Television programs are broadcasted on a national channel two times; in the mornings and evenings of certain days of the week. In addition to printed materials and television programs, academic counseling services are carried out, as well. Within the scope of academic counseling service, students' questions are answered and they are guided on the Internet environment. Besides, the third grade 'Practice in Pre-school Education' and the fourth year 'Teaching Practice' courses were prepared as Internet supported educational software.

Evaluation in the Program: Academic success of students is determined via central exams conducted according to regulations of Anadolu University on distance education. In accordance with the regulations, students take the exams three times a year at the scheduled dates in the academic calendar. Students take the exams at four sessions on Saturday and Sunday mornings and afternoons. Students take these exams that are administered as midterm, final, and make-up in the cities where their registration offices are located. All the exams are in the form of multiple-choice and they are evaluated by computers. Students are required to be successful for each course. Evaluation system is out of 100. Passing grade for each course is calculated by taking 30% of the midterm and 70% of the final or the make-up exam. In order to be successful for a particular course, a student's average must be 50.

In accordance with the exam regulations of Open Education Faculty, students who are in the pre-school education program prepare portfolios and these portfolios are evaluated by the mentor teachers in the schools where students practice teaching. The portfolios evaluated by the mentor teachers are sent to 'Evaluation Commission of Practice Portfolio', which is formed in Open Education Faculty, and this commission consisting of 18 members evaluates the portfolios once more. In 2005-2006 academic year, concerning 'Practice in Pre-school Education' and 'Teaching Practice' courses, '3.353' third grade and '4206' fourth grade, a total of 7.559 practice portfolios which were previously evaluated by the mentors and sent to Open Education Faculty were evaluated by the 'Evaluation Commission of Practice Portfolio'.

The Structure and Application of Pre-school Teacher Training Program in the Faculty of Open Education at Anadolu University

There are two different practice courses in this program; one in the 3rd grade, *Practice in Pre-school Education* and one in the 4th grade, *Teaching Practice*.

Practice courses are conducted according to the guide that is called Faculty-School Cooperation which was a joint product of Council of Higher Education and Ministry of Education. According to this guide (CHE, 1998, p.3) which specifies the details of Faculty-School Cooperation, the aim of the Faculty of Education-Practice School is to share the duties and responsibilities between the Faculty of Education and Practice School in order for teacher candidates to practice and develop their occupational knowledge and skills in an effective, productive and safe environment. The teaching practices conducted in cooperation with Anadolu University and Ministry of Education. In this cooperation, Practice Coordinator of Faculty of Open Education constitutes the Faculty party, and Coordinator of Practice School and Mentors constitute the Ministry of Education; in other words, practice school party. The institutions and people in charge of the practice are as follows (Gültekin, 2004).

Anadolu University Faculty of Open Education: The faculty is responsible for the organization of the activities concerning the Practice in Pre-school Education and Teaching Practice.

Practice Coordinator of Anadolu University Faculty of Open Education: This coordinator assigned by the Dean of Open Education Faculty organizes practices within the scope of Open Education Faculty.

Coordinator of Provincial Directorate of Education: These coordinators conduct the necessary management within the scope of cooperation.

Practice School: These are independent nursery schools in which teaching practices are carried out. They are under the supervision of Ministry of Education.

Coordinator of Practice School: These coordinators are the directors of the practice school. They arrange the activities that will be carried out by teacher candidates and ensures the conducting of the practices by determining the mentors. The Coordinators of Practice School take on the duties of guide teacher, as well. In this respect, they consult and observe the teacher candidates during the practice.

Mentor: Mentors guide the teacher candidates by planning their activities, evaluate the practice, and report the evaluation results to guide teacher to be sent to the Dean's Office of Open Education Faculty.

Numeric data regarding the practices conducted in 2005-2006 education year a total of 7.638 students; 3.428 third grade students and 4.220 fourth grade students practiced in 213 nursery schools in 81 cities under the supervision of Ministry of Education in 2005-2006 academic year. 81 practice coordinators of cities, 213 school coordinators of practice, and 688 mentors involve in conducting the practices.

In order to control whether the services given within the scope of Pre-school Teacher Training Program in Open Education Faculty are carried out efficiently and to detect the problems and find solutions, instructors from the Faculty of Education conduct *Observation and Guidance Applications* by visiting the cities. In this respect, the teams that are formed from the Faculty of Open Education and Faculty of Education interview the related people and observe the schools two times a year by visiting the determined cities.

Practice Courses in Pre-school Teacher Training Program in the Open Education Faculty

Practice in Pre-school Education: It is a course on the basis of observation, interview, practice, and evaluation in order for teacher candidates to be familiar with the practice school, students, program, and teachers. This course is conducted for 24 weeks as a full time (8 hours) a week. According to the academic calendar of Ministry of Education, it starts at the beginning of December and finishes at the end of June.

Scope: Practice in Pre-school Education course lasts throughout the academic year (24 weeks) as one day a week. Practice in Pre-school Education course provides teacher candidate with opportunities to

know the school and students, observe the experienced teachers on the job, study with students either individually or with small groups, and gain teaching experience even if with limited responsibilities.

Process: The following procedures should be done sequentially so that the activities of Practice in Pre-school Education course can be conducted in accord with its purpose:

- At the beginning of the academic year, mentor and teacher candidate prepare the annual study plan by studying the activities given above and if necessary by adding them new activities. Mentor and teacher candidate determine the distribution of the activities according to the weeks.
- Teacher candidate writes the report regarding the activity and puts it into the practice portfolio. The mentor guides the teacher candidate about this subject, and observes and gives feedback to the teacher candidate while practicing the activities.
- The mentor receives the teacher candidate's studies and reports to be evaluated at exam periods and submits the evaluation results to the related units.

Evaluation: The purpose in Practice in Pre-school Education course is *not to evaluate the competencies of teacher candidates, but to guide and help them in the process of gaining these competencies, instead*. Therefore, an evaluation focusing on training and developing is essential. This evaluation is done by the mentors as follows:

- Mentors receive and evaluate the teacher candidates' reports and activities according to the scheduled dates in the exam calendar of Open Education Faculty. The portfolios that will be submitted to the related units must include 12 activities and their 12 reports for the midterm exam and similarly they must include 12 activities and their 12 reports for the final exam.
- Observe the in-class practices of the teacher candidates and reports the observation to the teacher candidates.
- While determining the success grade of Practice in Pre-school Education course, mentors also keep the attendance of the teacher candidates in mind along with their reports and other activities.
- Teacher candidates' portfolios evaluated by the mentors are evaluated at the Open Education Faculty once more. In this evaluation, 50 % of the mentor's grade and 50 % of the grade given by the Open Education Faculty constitute the teacher candidate's grade.

Teaching Practice is a course, which is designed for teacher candidates to be able to practice and develop the knowledge, and skills they have already gained in a school environment and also to be able to gain the qualifications required by the profession.

Scope: Teaching Practice course is held one day a week and lasts throughout a semester (14 weeks). Teaching Practice is a course in which teacher candidates find opportunities to gain teaching practice both individually and in small groups.

Teacher candidates have to prepare and practice an eight-hour daily plan for 12 weeks within the scope of Teaching Practice course. Teacher candidates prepare a daily plan by choosing all or some of these activities in the light of the objective and behavioral objectives they determine. What is important is the realization of the objective and behavioral objectives in children through activities. If teachers benefit from the drama method, practices will be more efficient during the implementation of the daily plan. In the preparation of daily lesson plan, a booklet which is called *The Program in the Institutions of Pre-school Education* prepared by the Ministry of Education should be used.

Process: The following procedures should be done sequentially so that the activities of Teaching Practice course can be conducted in accord with its purpose:

- Mentor and teacher candidate study the activities given above at the beginning of the practice and if necessary, add new activities to the existing ones and prepare the semester study plan. The distribution of the activities according to the weeks is specified. The semester study plan is submitted to the

coordinators of practice school, as well. The coordinators of practice school should be informed about the semester study plan since they will participate in evaluation and will fill out the evaluation forms.

- Mentors observe the teacher candidates and after teacher candidates conduct the activity, mentors share their observations with teacher candidates through a positive feedback so that the teacher candidates can be aware of their weak points and develop themselves.
- Teacher candidates put the plan related to the activity they completed and the plan samples into the practice portfolio. At the end of the practices, teacher candidates complete the portfolio including all the activities and submit it to the mentor.
- Teacher candidates fulfill all the activities specified in the study plan, and they develop themselves in the light of the feedback of mentors and coordinators of practice school.
- Mentors evaluate the activities of teacher candidates and submit the results and student portfolios to the related units.

Evaluation: The purpose of the Teaching Practice course is *to evaluate the competencies of teacher candidates and to help and guide them to develop these competencies*. Therefore, an evaluation focusing on training and developing is essential. The success grade of teacher candidates is determined using *Teaching Practice Observation Form* and *Teaching Practice Evaluation Form*. *Teaching Practice Evaluation Form* was designed to measure and evaluate the in-class teaching skills of teacher candidates. The items in this form include the teaching competencies that can be observable in the classroom. There are two purposes of using this form.

- To give feedback concerning the activities that will be presented by the teacher candidate during teaching practice,
- To provide data to the mentor and coordinator of practice school in order to be able to fill out the teaching practice evaluation form.

Teaching Practice Evaluation Form was prepared to summarize the developments of teacher candidates regarding teaching skills, and to evaluate their success in teaching practice. This form is filled out by using the observation forms, which are filled during the activities carried out by teacher candidates. In filling out the form, the last decision regarding the competency of teacher candidate as a result of the in-class observations is determined by marking one of the options D= Deficient, A= Acceptable, G= Good.

The improvements in teaching practice and the learning levels reached by teacher candidates are monitored through teaching practice observation form. The practice success grades of teacher candidates are determined by filling out the teaching practice evaluation form depending on teaching practice observation form. This form is filled out by mentors and coordinators of practice school; however, the success grade is given by mentors.

Beside these forms, the practice portfolio is an important criterion in the evaluation of the developments and the activities conducted by teacher candidates during teaching practice. The process in the evaluation is as follows:

- By observing the activities that will be carried out by the teacher candidates, mentors fill out the observation forms at least two times, one for the midterm and one for the final exam keeping the exam calendar of Open Education Faculty in mind. Mentors share their observations with teacher candidates and give feedback regarding the activities carried out by teacher candidates.
- Mentors fill out two observation forms, one for the midterm and one for the final exam, based on the observation results according to the exam calendar of Open Education Faculty.
- Mentors' grades given based on the evaluation form for the midterm are essential in determining the success grade of Teaching Practice Course. The final exam's grade is calculated by taking the 50 %

of the grade given by mentors and coordinators of practice school based on the evaluation form and by taking the 50 % of mentors' grade given for the portfolio prepared by teacher candidates.

- The practice portfolios of teacher candidates are evaluated at Open Education Faculty by the 'Evaluation Commission of Practice Portfolio', too. In this evaluation, the mentors' grade for the portfolio and the grade's of the Evaluation Commission of Practice Portfolio are added and divided by two. Later, in order to determine the success grade of teacher candidate regarding *Teaching Practice* course, the practice grade and practice portfolio's grade are added and divided by two.

Conclusion

'The Undergraduate Program for Pre-school Teacher Training' in Open Education Faculty, which is one of the teacher training programs of Anadolu University and has been successfully implemented since 2001-2002, is a unique program with its structure and implementation. Teaching practices have a significant place in this program because the teaching practices include the activities that students transform into practice from the knowledge and skills they have gained through theoretical courses.

The organization of the structure and the application of teaching practices are successfully conducted by the cooperation of the Faculty and Ministry of Education. The city visits carried out within the scope of *Observation and Guidance Applications* show that there are not any important problems except the high number of students, some communication problems, and not to read the guides related to applications.

Carrying out the program extensively with a great number of students in the whole country with minimum problems shows that the applications are conducted in an intended way. However, the improvement studies should be conducted regarding the applications and these suggestions can be put forward:

- The number of students should be lowered.
- Some supplementary services that will improve the quality of the practices should be provided. In this respect, some studies must be conducted in order to train the mentors better.
- Some studies regarding the practices must be conducted, and in the light of the activities, the necessary improvements should be done.

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