



Evaluation of Primary Teacher Candidates' Views on Multigrade Class Application

Sınıf Öğretmeni Adaylarının Birleştirilmiş Sınıf Uygulamasına Yönelik Görüşlerinin Değerlendirilmesi

ABSTRACT

The concept of multigrade classroom implementation involves two or more classes forming a group and learning together under the guidance of a single teacher. This study aims to evaluate the views of prospective primary teachers regarding multigrade classroom practices. The research was conducted on 30 final-year prospective primary teachers enrolled in the Department of Primary School Teaching at Bartın University Faculty of Education during the 2024-2025 academic year. The research model is descriptive. The descriptive model is a research approach that reflects an existing situation as it is. In determining the participants in the study, the easily accessible sampling method was used. Convenience sampling method is a sampling method that provides convenience to the researcher in terms of time, expense and reaching the participants. Semi-structured interview form was used to collect data in the study. Semi-structured interview form was developed by the researcher. During the development of the semi-structured interview form, an expert opinion was obtained from an academican working in the field of primary education. Content analysis method was used in the evaluation of the data obtained in the study. The answers given by the participants to the questions in the semi-structured interview form were coded, and then these codes were divided into themes. Percentage calculations from statistical methods and techniques were used in the analysis of the data in the study. As a result of the research, it was determined that all of the primary teacher candidates (%100) did not take any courses related to teaching in multigrade classes during their undergraduate education, that the teaching practice (internship) had to be done in a school with multigrade classes (%100), that the primary teacher candidates considered themselves inadequate in teaching multigrade classes (%93.33), and that they thought they would have problems if their first appointment was to a school with multigrade classes (96.66).

Keywords: Multigrade Class, Primary Teacher Candidates, Evaluation.

ÖZET

Birleştirilmiş sınıf uygulaması, iki ya da daha fazla sınıfın, bir grup teşkil ederek bir öğretmen yönetiminde birlikte öğrenim görmesidir. Bu çalışmanın amacı sınıf öğretmeni adaylarının birleştirilmiş sınıf uygulamasına yönelik görüşlerinin değerlendirilmesidir. Araştırma Bartın Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Sınıf Öğretmenliği Bölümünde 2024-2025 akademik yılında öğrenim gören son sınıf 30 sınıf öğretmeni adayı üzerinden yapılmıştır. Araştırmanın modeli betimseldir. Betimsel model, var olan bir durumu olduğu gibi yansıtan araştırma yaklaşımıdır. Araştırmada katılımcıların belirlenmesinde örneklem yöntemlerinden kolay ulaşılabilir örnekleme yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Kolay ulaşılabilir örnekleme yöntemi, araştırmacıya zaman, masraf ve katılımcılara ulaşma yönünden kolaylık sağlayan örnekleme yöntemidir. Araştırmada verilerin toplanması için yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu kullanılmıştır. Yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu araştırmacı tarafından geliştirilmiştir. Yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formunun geliştirilmesi sürecinde sınıf eğitimi bilim dalında görev yapan bir akademisyenden uzman görüşü alınmıştır. Araştırmada elde edilen verilerin değerlendirilmesinde içerik analizi yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Katılımcıların yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formunda bulunan sorulara verdikleri cevaplar kodlanmış, sonra bu kodlar temalara ayrılmıştır. Araştırmada verilerin analizinde istatistiksel yöntem ve tekniklerden yüzde hesaplamaları kullanılmıştır. Araştırma sonucunda sınıf öğretmeni adaylarının tamamının (%100) lisans öğrenimleri sırasında birleştirilmiş sınıflarda öğretimle ilgili herhangi bir ders almadıkları, öğretmenlik uygulamasının (stajın) birleştirilmiş sınıflı bir okulda yapılmasının gerekli olduğu (%100), sınıf öğretmeni adaylarının birleştirilmiş sınıf okutma konusunda kendilerini yetersiz gördükleri (%93,33), ilk atamalarının birleştirilmiş sınıflı bir okula çıkması durumunda sıkıntı yaşayacaklarını düşündükleri (96,66) tespit edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Birleştirilmiş Sınıf, Sınıf Öğretmeni Adayları, Değerlendirme.

INTRODUCTION

Multigrade classrooms refer to educational settings in which students from multiple grade levels receive instruction together in the same physical space under the guidance of a single teacher. This educational model is commonly referred to in the literature as multigrade teaching (Binbaşıoğlu, 1999, p. 1). According to Çınar

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(2004, p. 1), this concept is primarily associated with primary schools in rural areas, where students from different grade levels are taught together due to factors such as teacher and classroom shortages and low student enrollment. In such classrooms, students of varying grade levels interact and communicate while participating in the learning process. The aim is to provide instruction tailored to the individual differences of students who vary in developmental characteristics and readiness levels within the same classroom environment.

There are several compelling factors behind the widespread implementation of multigrade classroom practices (MCP) in Turkey's education system. Key reasons include efforts to expand access to primary education nationwide, low student populations in certain regions, insufficient numbers of teachers, a lack of classrooms, the economic burden of assigning teachers to sparsely populated villages, the need to reopen closed village schools as an alternative to centralized transportation-based education, and the challenges posed by geographical distances and limited transportation infrastructure (Dursun, 2006, p. 34; Karaman, 2006, p. 40; Şahin, 2007, p. 4; Taşdemir, 2009, p. 108).

Currently, it is estimated that there are approximately 7,000 active multigrade classrooms throughout Turkey, which implies a high probability that newly graduated teacher candidates may be appointed to such schools (Anadolu Agency, 2020). Multigrade classrooms offer several advantages. They enable the appointment of teachers to remote areas, thereby providing access to education for many children. Furthermore, placing students of diverse ages, knowledge levels, and abilities in the same environment enhances peer interaction and contributes to socialization processes. These classrooms also serve broader social functions, such as supporting rural development and providing community-based adult education programs. Moreover, encouraging students to engage in independent learning for extended periods fosters self-regulation, research, and learning skills. Delegating a degree of responsibility for teaching and learning to students is another pedagogical benefit (Akbaşlı & Pilten, 1999, p. 1; Doğan, 2000, pp. 181–184; Öztürk, 2007, pp. 30–31; Mulkeen & Higgins, 2009, p. 2).

Despite these advantages, multigrade teaching also presents significant challenges. Among these is the increased workload, authority, and responsibilities placed on teachers. Teachers must invest considerable time and energy into lesson preparation, complicating the instructional process. Achieving all the learning objectives set in the national curriculum becomes more difficult due to the diversity of grade levels, resulting in various practical challenges. Moreover, the lack of sufficient knowledge and experience among teachers regarding multigrade instruction may negatively impact the quality of education. Additionally, the inadequate access to necessary guidance services further limits the effectiveness of the model (Köksal, 2009, p. 12).

According to Palanav (2007, p. 27), the simultaneous instruction of multiple grade levels in multigrade classrooms necessitates a highly organized and systematic instructional approach. In this context, teachers must consider students' interests and needs while planning instruction, and also adapt to local environmental conditions. The primary challenge, however, is that the teacher must deliver instruction to multiple student groups with varying developmental and academic levels simultaneously. Since it is not possible to teach different subjects to all groups at once, teachers often assign one group to independent work while directly instructing the other.

Given that most multigrade primary schools operate with a single teacher, it can be argued that the quality and quantity of instructional activities in these schools are inadequate. According to Tekişik (1984), one of the most critical problems in these schools is that a single teacher must simultaneously manage four different grade levels within one classroom and cover approximately 25 topics in five class hours per day. This situation is considered a major factor contributing to low academic achievement in village schools.

Teachers assigned to such demanding educational environments must be both professionally competent and experienced in order to deliver effective instruction. However, in practice, many newly graduated primary teacher candidates are assigned to rural schools in villages or hamlets immediately after graduation. This reality constitutes a key challenge in multigrade classroom practices. Feedback from novice teachers reveals that they often lack the necessary knowledge and skills related to multigrade instruction, resulting in various difficulties in practice (İzci, 2008).

Furthermore, during their undergraduate education, teacher candidates typically complete their teaching practicum in single-grade classrooms located in central schools. As a result, they begin their professional careers in multigrade rural schools without any practical experience in such settings. Teaching in village schools requires far more effort than teaching in urban, single-grade classrooms. Newly appointed teachers in villages often face social and professional adaptation challenges. Due to insufficient training during their undergraduate studies, they are typically forced to rely on trial-and-error methods in their teaching practice.

Field studies indicate that teachers frequently report a mismatch between curriculum objectives and student levels, that many concepts are unfamiliar to students, and that they are required to concretize abstract ideas during instruction. Additionally, a lack of necessary teaching materials and difficulties in time management negatively affect the teaching process (Summak et al., 2011).

Several studies have investigated the challenges of teaching in multigrade classrooms (Özben, 1997; Yıldız & Köksal, 2009; Sağ, Savaş & Sezer, 2009; Karcı & Vural, 2011; Elma, 2013; Özdemir, Özdemir & Gül, 2020; Utku & Kan, 2020; Ocakçı & Samancı, 2019). These studies comprehensively address structural issues, the difficulties teachers face, and potential solutions. However, despite these efforts, the problems associated with multigrade classrooms largely persist.

Little (1994) notes that many teachers working in multigrade classrooms report that this practice imposes a significant burden on them. Research findings indicate that this model negatively affects teachers' performance, professional attitudes, and motivation. Moreover, the majority of teachers state that, if given a choice, they would prefer to work in single-grade classrooms instead. These findings suggest a need for serious pedagogical, professional, and structural evaluations of multigrade teaching.

With the recent curriculum change in primary teacher education programs, the course "Teaching in Multigrade Classrooms," which was previously offered as a two-hour theoretical course per week, has been removed. As a result, teacher candidates now graduate without receiving any theoretical instruction or practicum experience in multigrade settings. Despite this, many are still assigned to village schools where they are expected to teach in multigrade classrooms. Feedback from newly appointed teachers indicates that they feel unprepared for this role and face difficulties in addressing their deficiencies. This study aims to examine the views of prospective primary school teachers on multigrade teaching practices. The findings are expected to contribute to identifying solutions to the problems associated with multigrade classrooms.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the perspectives of prospective primary school teachers regarding multigrade classroom practices. In line with this aim, the following research questions are addressed:

- ✓ What is the perceived level of competence of prospective primary teachers in teaching multigrade classrooms?
- ✓ What are their views on the necessity of including a course on multigrade teaching in the undergraduate curriculum?
- ✓ What are their opinions on completing the teaching practicum in a multigrade school setting?
- ✓ What are their views on the potential challenges they may face when initially assigned to a multigrade school?

METHOD

Research Design

A descriptive research design will be employed in this study. Descriptive research aims to portray an existing phenomenon as it naturally occurs, without any intervention by the researcher.

The phenomenon, individual, or object of interest is examined within its current conditions and defined as it is (Karasar, 2009). The primary objective of the descriptive approach is to reflect the situation in an objective and accurate manner.

Study Group

The study group will consist of 30 senior-year prospective primary school teachers enrolled in the Department of Primary Education at Bartın University, Faculty of Education. The participants will be selected using the convenience sampling method.

This approach is particularly useful in cases where time and resources are limited, as it allows the researcher to select individuals who are easily accessible (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013).

Data Collection Tools

A semi-structured interview form will be used as the data collection tool in this research.

A semi-structured interview form includes flexible and open-ended questions that allow participants to express their own perspectives. Unlike structured interviews, it does not involve strictly predetermined questions and

answers (Merriam, 2013). The interview form will consist of four items. Expert opinions will be sought during the development of the interview form to ensure its validity.

Data Analysis

The data obtained in this study will be analyzed using the content analysis method. Each response to the semi-structured interview questions will be coded individually. These codes will then be grouped under overarching categories based on their similarities, and themes will be generated accordingly. Content analysis is defined as the process of organizing data that share common characteristics into meaningful themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). The responses obtained from the interviews will be categorized, and similar statements will be grouped within the same category to enable systematic analysis. Based on these data, evaluations will be made and the results will be interpreted.

To ensure reliability during the analysis process, the formation of themes and categories will involve input from two researchers. Metaphors or expressions on which the researchers initially disagreed will be identified and discussed until a consensus is reached. The impact of any discrepancies on the reliability of the research will be calculated using an appropriate reliability formula. Additionally, percentage calculations will be used in the statistical analysis of the data.

FINDINGS

The findings obtained from the research are presented in tabular format.

Table 1: Prospective Primary School Teachers' Opinions on Receiving Courses Related to Multigrade Classroom Practices in Their Undergraduate Education

Question: Did you take any courses related to multigrade classroom practices during your undergraduate education?	No (100%)
	Yes (0%)

Table 1 shows that all prospective primary school teachers (100%) reported that they had not taken any courses related to multigrade classroom practices during their undergraduate education.

Table 2: Prospective Primary School Teachers' Opinions on Completing Their Teaching Practicum in a Multigrade Classroom Setting

Question: Do you think the teaching practicum should be conducted in a multigrade classroom setting? Why or why not?	Yes (100%)	It is necessary in order to gain experience (100%)
	No (0%)	

Table 2 shows that all prospective primary school teachers (100%) stated that the teaching practicum (internship) should be conducted in a multigrade classroom setting. The reason cited by all participants (100%) was the importance of gaining experience.

Table 3: Prospective Primary School Teachers' Opinions on Feeling Adequately Prepared to Teach in a Multigrade Classroom

Question: How do you rate your level of preparedness to teach in a multigrade classroom?	Adequate (3,33%)
	Inadequate (93,33%)
	Somewhat Adequate (3.33%)

According to Table 3, the majority of prospective primary school teachers consider themselves inadequate for teaching in a multigrade classroom (93.33%). The percentage of those who consider themselves adequate for teaching in a multigrade classroom is 3.33%, while the percentage of those who consider themselves somewhat adequate is also 3.33%.

Table 4: Prospective Primary School Teachers' Opinions on Whether They Would Face Difficulties If Their First Appointment Was to a Multigrade Classroom School

Question: Do you think you would face difficulties if your first appointment was to a multigrade classroom school? Why or why not?	Yes (96,66%)	Lack of experience (55,17%)
		Lack of education/training (34,48%)
		High responsibility required (10,34%)
	No (3,33%)	No reason provided

According to Table 4, the majority of prospective primary school teachers (96.66%) stated that they would face difficulties if their first appointment was to a multigrade classroom school. The reasons cited for this were lack of experience (55.17%), lack of education/training (34.48%), and the high responsibility required (10.34%). Those who thought they would not face any difficulties (3.33%) did not provide any reasons.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the study revealed that all of the prospective primary school teachers (100%) did not take any courses related to teaching in multigrade classrooms during their undergraduate education. They all agreed (100%) that teaching practice (internship) should be carried out in a multigrade classroom. Furthermore, it was found that the majority of prospective teachers consider themselves inadequate (93.33%) when it comes to teaching in multigrade classrooms. Additionally, most of the participants (96.66%) expressed that they would face difficulties if their first appointment was to a multigrade classroom.

The research indicates that prospective teachers are insufficient in terms of teaching in multigrade classrooms. It was found that teacher candidates who had not taken any courses or carried out internships in multigrade classroom settings during their undergraduate education might encounter problems when they begin their teaching careers. In studies conducted by Dursun (2006) and Elma (2013), it was stated that teaching multiple grades simultaneously is challenging for teachers, as the time is insufficient to cover the learning objectives. Furthermore, managing multiple classes in one classroom presents both physical and organizational difficulties. Similarly, Yıldız and Köksal (2009), Karıcı and Vural (2011), and Utku and Kan (2020) argued that teaching programs designed for independent classes lead to challenges for teachers when implemented in multigrade classrooms.

In the current study, the majority of prospective teachers (96.66%) believed that they would face difficulties if assigned to a multigrade classroom. This result is consistent with previous studies. Aksoy (2008), Sidekli, Coşkun, and Aydın (2015) noted that when teacher candidates carry out their teaching practices in urban schools, they are not adequately prepared for the reality of teaching in rural schools. As a result, they face difficulties adapting when they are later appointed to rural areas.

In the 2019-2020 academic year, changes were made to the curriculum of the teacher education programs, and as part of this restructuring, the course on teaching in multigrade classrooms was removed from the primary education program. It is a known fact that teacher candidates, who do not receive adequate theoretical training on teaching in multigrade classrooms and only complete their internships in urban schools, face challenges when appointed to rural schools. The study found that prospective primary school teachers consider themselves inadequate when it comes to teaching in multigrade classrooms, as they did not receive any training on this topic during their undergraduate education. It was also noted that these teacher candidates believe they will experience significant difficulties due to a lack of experience and training if they are appointed to a multigrade classroom.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations can be made:

- ✓ The course on teaching in multigrade classrooms, which was previously removed, should be reintroduced into the primary education curriculum.
- ✓ Prospective primary school teachers should be encouraged to carry out part of their teaching practice (internship) in rural schools with multigrade classrooms.

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