ELT Teacher Trainees' Reflective Feedback to Their Cooperating Teachers

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Abstract

The current study aims at exploring what teacher trainees expect from their cooperating teachers and what they really experience with cooperating teachers (CTs) in practice schools. A pre-practicum questionnaire (expectation) and post-practicum questionnaire (experience) were utilized in order to find the differences in teacher trainees' expectations and experiences in practicum,. The data were gathered from 86 teacher trainees, who were in the practicum period in the last year of their education in ELT Department in a public university in Turkey. In order to triangulate the data collection, different instruments such as questionnaires, interviews and field notes were used. Both the qualitative and quantitative analyses were performed in this study. For quantitative analysis, the frequencies and mean scores for each item were taken; in addition, the T-test was utilized. For qualitative data, categories and sub-categories were formed. The areas in which help is desired and considered important by teacher trainees were analyzed under three main categories: Readiness for practicum, planning and reflection, and mentoring. The results showed that teacher trainees have considerable expectations from the CTs. On the other hand, the findings revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between teacher trainees' expectations and experiences. The level of help provided by CTs was below the level of teacher trainees' expectations. Implications and suggestions for further research were also highlighted for the stakeholders of the practicum process.

1. Introduction

How teacher trainees learn to teach has been the focus of considerable amount of research since Dewey, who emphasized learner-centered teaching. The professional growth of teacher trainees has also been an important issue for many professional organizations throughout the world such as the National Council for Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE), the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) and also Higher Education Council (HEC) in Turkey and groups such as The National Network for Educational Renewal, Holmes Group, and the Renaissance Group. These organizations and groups have made research and issued influential reports for the improvement of teacher education worldwide[1]. Almost all of the research carried out in them has highlighted the importance of practicum period for a teacher candidate.

Among the important aspects of the practicum period, the relationship between teacher trainees and cooperating teachers is a crucial one since they are the main characters of this process. Seeing as practice teaching plays an important role in shaping teacher trainees' values, beliefs, and teaching skills, the impact of the role of cooperating teachers gain importance (Wood and Weasmer, 2003). The success of teacher trainees depends on the opportunities they have in practice schools in order to reconsider their beliefs in the light of experiences they encounter, where they will teach and with whom. During practicum, a new pattern of thinking and understanding emerges in relation to 'self as a teacher' and application and sharing what they've already learned in the assistance of cooperating teacher. Moreover, teacher trainees spend far more time with their cooperating teachers than with their supervisor in the university (Gürsoy and Damar, 2011). Therefore, the cooperating teacher has much greater influence on the outcome of this process. Throughout the literature, although there are a large number of studies emphasize the importance of practicum process, the definition of the roles of all parties in the process and the problems encountered by the parties (Fairbanks et al., 2000; Clarke, 2001; Osam and Balbay, 2004; Kiraz and Yıldırım, 2007), very few studies address teacher trainees' expectations from cooperating teachers and none their collaborative exchanges during practicum. Moreover, the aforementioned studies are mostly related to general exchanges between CTs and trainees regardless of field focus. In order to shed light to ELT teacher trainees' needs and primarily exchanges with their mentors in the practicum, the

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[1] OECD Report, Muster Report

research questions are as follows:

1. What are the ELT teacher trainees' expectations from mentor teachers?
2. What are the experiences of the teacher trainees in practice schools with regard to mentorship?
3. Is there a mismatch between what teacher trainees expect and what they experience with mentor teachers in practice schools?

Therefore, this study would be of significance in that it will describe the level of collaboration between the ELT teacher trainees and mentor teachers in such a beneficial process. The study will also serve as a support the standardization of the roles and responsibilities of the parties by looking at the different mentoring procedures within the study.

2. Literature Review

In teacher education, the practicum is always considered as one of the most useful components of the programs. The practicum is also seen as an important team activity and 'a core learning experience' for teacher trainees (Wright, 2010: 282), and needs members who work cooperatively in this system. Therefore, "a three-tier system" involving trainees, teacher trainers and CTs, is essential in the practicum setting (Burton & Greher, 2007). The related research shows us that in this setting, practical aspects of the teaching preparation are more highly valued than other elements of the teacher education programs. Therefore, the importance of the support from the cooperating teachers comes out strong and loud for the teacher trainees. Teacher trainees also highlight the importance of their cooperating teachers' role and see them as the most highly valued support and resource and acknowledge as being critical to the success in their professional development (Smith & Lev Ari, 2005; Sanders et al.,2005). Despite this, there is little consensus in the literature as to the precise roles CTs are expected to fulfill during practicum. What the CTs are supposed to do and what they actually do also seem to be vague. In depth, there are different conceptions of roles identified in the literature and also there are variations within the set roles. (Hennissen & Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen, Theo Bergen, 2008). At the practical level, it is apparent that while there is a number of conceptualization of supervisory models for CTs, they do not necessarily match the practices and beliefs held by CTs. In the relevant research, Kiraz and Yıldırım (2007) mention that most of the CTs consider themselves as in the position of *grading* the trainees during their practice teaching. As they indicate that evaluating trainees is not the only responsibility of CTs and they should provide feedback, guide and assist the trainees during the process and also behave as a colleague for their development in the field. Bullough (2005) argues that if stakeholders of the practicum, here trainers, administrators, program developers and etc., do not pay attention to the identity formation of CTs and to the ways in which they learn about their role, the practicum will continue to be only a weak exercise in pre-service teacher education institutions.

The relevant literature has demonstrated that there have always been some attempts to define different roles of the CTs by the researchers, teacher trainers (Gürsoy and Damar, 2011; Hennisen et al., 2008). These attempts sometimes demonstrate slight differences according to the countries and their education systems. When the theoretical conceptualization of these roles of CTs are examined, it is seen that the CT can act like a *model*, *planner* of teaching experiences and *evaluator*, *observer*, *evaluator*, *demonstrator*, *conferencer*, *professional peer*, *counselor* and *friend* (Beck and Kosnik,2000; Sanders et al., 2005; Weasmer and Woods,2003; Fairbanks et al.,2000 and Clarke, 2001; Kiraz and Yıldırım, 2007). However the studies on the role of CTs point out that the roles are also weakly defined in diverse contexts (Applegate and Lasley,1982; Cole and Sorril,1992; and Grimmet and Ratzlaff; 1986). The dilemma related to the roles of CTs has been identified in Kuter and Koç's (2009) study where they indicate that the identity of CTs is unclear and, thus, they are 'struggling for something unknown during supervisions and observations' in the practicum settings (p. 420). Additionally, what is unclear in the literature, in general, is the extent to which the possible roles of CTs are expected, accepted by teacher trainees and actually practiced by the CTs in practice schools. Many cooperating teachers who are expected to take on the role of a coach or a mentor rely on craft-centered traditional approaches that favor practicing and delivering congruent with their own. Moreover, several studies indicate that lack of supportive mentoring leave both teacher trainees and novice teachers to face the many challenges of their professional lives alone (Smith and Ingersoll, 2004; Delaney, 2012).

In Turkish context, Faculty-School Cooperation Booklet prepared by the Higher Education Council (HEC) (1998) identifies the roles of the participants in the process. The roles are ranging from organizing the working schedule of the trainee, helping trainee's to plan daily activities to reflecting on trainees' practices, evaluation of the trainees. Therefore, this study aims to explore the expectations of teacher trainees in relation to the roles of CTs and the actual roles performed by CTs from the perspectives of EFL teacher trainees. Furthermore, this study could be of significance that it

will help the conceptualization of CTs roles and responsibilities in the light of the needs of 'EFL' teacher trainees in Turkish context.

3. Method

This study aims at investigating ELT trainees' expectations and CTs' competence in practicum through the perspective of teacher trainees. In order to address above issues, this study adopted both the qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. In the literature, there is little doubt that research which involves the integration of quantitative and qualitative research has become increasingly common in recent years. The present study might be attributed as quantitative in the sense that a survey will be conducted with the intention of describing a group of EFL teacher trainees' expectations. Employing the questionnaires to a large group of teacher trainees and the comparison of the results of the pre and post questionnaires on the issue held the quantitative part of the study. Although the expectations of the teacher trainees driven by a large scale focus is insightful, a need is also felt to listen the voices of the participants concerning the research issue under investigation. This need triggered the researcher to employ qualitative research procedures as well. The data that was pulled through the open-ended parts of the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews with the participants and field notes will constitute the qualitative part of the study.

3.1 Setting

The practice part of the pre-service training in Turkey is completed with School Experience and Teaching Practice courses, which have both theoretical and practical content, during the final year of the teacher education programs in the education faculties. The Teaching Practice course which was the focus of time of the current study is the last formal pre-service practice for teacher trainees. During the teaching practice course, which is completed during the second term, trainees practice in high schools to gain experience. The observation and practice period in Teaching Practice/Practicum is six-hours a week. Each teacher trainer is responsible from a group of 10-12 trainees, whereas each cooperating teacher has a group of 5-6 trainees. CTs, during the sessions with teacher trainees, are required to fulfill their roles and responsibilities defined by Faculty-School Cooperation Booklet prepared by the Higher Education Council (HEC) (1998). Accordingly, the CT,

- organizes the working schedule of the trainee together with the teacher trainer,
- enables the trainer to make observations in his/her lessons, use various teaching methods and techniques and help his/her occupational development,
- introduces the school to the trainer, provides necessary teaching aids and context,
- helps the trainer to plan his/her daily activities and lessons,
- observes and evaluates the trainer,
- doesn't leave the trainee in the classroom alone for long periods of time,
- keeps a file for each trainee that constitutes the observation and evaluation forms,
- after the observation hands out a copy of the lesson observation form to the trainee with necessary feedback,
- examines the trainee's observation file regularly with the trainer, monitors their development and help his/her development in a positive way,
- guides the trainee in out-of-class activities(Gürsoy and Damar, 2011).

3.2 Participants

The study was conducted with 86 senior ELT teacher trainees (71 female and 15 male) during their final year of study at Uludag University, Bursa, Turkey. The teacher trainees had completed almost all of the methodological courses at the department and they were almost ready for their practicum process before graduation. They participated in the study in two phases. In the first phase, they filled out the pre-practicum questionnaires at the very beginning of the semester before they went to the practice school as the questionnaires quest for their expectations. In the second phase, at the end of the semester when they completed teaching practice sessions, they were given post questionnaires and involved in the interviews.

ISSN 2239-978X
ISSN 2240-0524

Journal of Educational and Social Research
MCSER Publishing, Rome-Italy

Vol. 3 No. 7
October 2013

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that a triangulation of various types of qualitative instrumentation be used to validate data and provide rich descriptions of the issue and the participants. In order to get a comprehensible data and elaborate description of the research issue, the study employed a variety of research tools in a triangulative manner.
The data sources of the present study will include the following:
1. Pre-practicum Expectation Questionnaire (Teacher Trainees)
2. Post-practicum Competency Questionnaire (Teacher Trainees)
3. Semi-structured Interviews (Teacher Trainees and Mentor Teachers)
4. Field Notes

To reach the aim of the study, a five-step scale questionnaire is adapted from a scale development study by Kiraz (2003) and it is modified to get a comprehensible data on the issue. In the initial modification process, new items and an open-ended section were added to the questionnaire and some items were excluded since they were irrelevant to either the aims of the study or the participants who were ELT teacher trainees. Then, five ELT lecturers, who had taken part in the practicum process several times, were given the questionnaire and expert view was sought for content-validity. Based on the feedback received from the experts, the instrument was revised. Accordingly, in order to re-ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was administered to a group of 17 teacher trainees who would not take part in the actual study and pilot tested. The teacher trainees were asked to provide feedback and suggestions in terms of the clarity of the items and the comprehensiveness of the whole instrument. According to the results of the piloting and the expert view, the areas in which support is desired and considered important by teacher trainees were analyzed under three main categories: Readiness for practicum (Items 1-7), planning and reflection(Items 8-14), and mentoring (Items 15-25).

The questionnaire were administered in two phases: first, at the beginning of the spring term to gather information about the expectations of teacher trainees, and secondly, at the end of the term to get information about what teacher trainees experience in practice teaching with respect to actual help given by CTs. The pre-practicum questionnaire asked the teacher trainees to indicate their expectations from cooperating teachers during practicum. The post-practicum questionnaire was delivered to the same teacher trainees during the last week of the practicum to learn about their experiences in relation to competencies of the CTs in the given domains. In both phases, the teacher trainees were asked to indicate their responses on a five-step scale both the expectations from their CTs and the level of help provided by their CTs in each area mentioned above. In the pre-practicum questionnaire, the scales were ranging from '*strongly agree'(5)* to '*strongly disagree'* (1) *;* they were from '*definitely competent'(5)* to '*definitely not competent'* (1) in the post-practicum questionnaire.

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed through SPSS 15.0 for descriptive statistical analysis such as the frequency analysis of the items. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data collected through 25 close-ended items in the questionnaire. The means and standard deviations were also calculated in order to find out the participants views regarding the categories in the questionnaire. Moreover, in order to see whether there is a significant difference between students' expectations and experiences, *paired sample T-test* was employed.

Cohen and Manion (1998) state that interviews provide researchers in-depth information and might act as a complementary research instrument. In the present study, interviews were held with the purpose of elicitation comprehension and verification of the data obtained through questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews lasted 15-30 minutes were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. As interviews, field notes were also analysed by means of content analysis. First, the researcher read through all the interview data and field notes to identify meaningful units based on the research questions. Each interview was examined for themes about CTs and the level of competency at fulfilling their roles.

4. Findings

4.1 Teacher trainees' expectations from CTs and the help provided by CTs

The descriptive data indicated that teacher trainees had a higher expectation scores than experience scores, indicating a gap between experiences and expectations in the practicum (see Table 1, 2, 3, 4). This gap is supported by paired sample t-test. (See table 4). Here, the findings were organized under three main sections for each category. Initially, the analysis of quantitative data collected through pre-practicum expectations questionnaire from 86 teacher trainees was presented. Then, the analysis of quantitative data collected through pre-practicum expectations and post-practicum

experience questionnaires was provided to see whether there is a mismatch between the help expected and provided in the practicum. Finally, the analysis of qualitative data collected through interviews and open-ended questions was presented to support the quantitative results and define any other factors that might have impact on CTs' competence.

Table 1. Mean scores of the items in the category of Readiness for Supervision

Items	Expectations	Competency
Item01 Managing time and school environment	4.83	3.36
Item02 Being knowledgeable about the practicum	4.40	3.42
Item03 Providing information on practicum	4.62	3.69
Item04 Ready and willing to supervise	4.55	3.77
Item05 Organizing the physical environment	4.73	3.97
Item 06 Positive interpersonal skills	4.76	3.41
Item 07 Organizing and preparing materials	4.47	3.16

The preliminary findings related to teacher trainees' expectations from CTs were related to basically *readiness for supervision (Table 1)*. It involves much more variety ranging from preparation of physical environment for practice teaching to becoming knowledgeable and ready for the process. In general practicum settings, administrators and CTs are informed about the rules, roles and routines in advance so that practicum program can be organized before teacher trainees' arrival. When the findings of the related items are examined, it is seen that teacher trainees seemed to have strong expectations from CTs. The same items in the post-practicum questionnaire indicated that the teacher trainees rate their cooperating teachers' readiness for supervision as only 'good'. In general, it is assumed that CTs have adequate knowledge in terms of their roles and responsibilities and the purpose of supervision. However, the results show that only 43 percent of teacher trainees rated their CTs definitely competent. Item 7 related to organization and preparation of materials in advance has the lowest mean in this category. Although teacher trainees strongly (89%) expect some necessary physical preparation by CTs in the practicum school as they are 'outsiders' in practice schools, CTs do not show the expected level of readiness for their trainees.

Table 2. Mean scores of the items in the category of planning and reflection

Items	Expectations	Competency
Item08 Instructional planning and strategies	4.45	2.58
Item09 Working on sample lesson plans and reflection	4.10	2.19
Item10 Giving the rationale/essential parts of a lesson	4.34	2.35
Item11 Preparing lesson plans	3.67	2.26
Item12 Lesson plan and actual practice	4.33	2.16
Item13 Reflection on lesson	4.01	2.20
Item14 Justification of specific strategies	4.30	3.05

As for the planning and reflection, most of the teacher trainees desire a certain amount of help from their CTs. The most important issues such as providing help for lesson planning and reflecting on teacher trainees' practice teaching lie in this category. The mean scores of expectation questionnaire items are between *3.67* and *4.45* indicating strong expectations on planning and reflection. CTs competency in this category is far from what is expected. Being in connection with the above finding, CTs' competency in planning and reflection is between 'poor' to 'partially competent' (mean scores *2.16-3.05*). The only item trainees find CTs partially competent was that CTs' justification of the reasons behind the selection of a specific teaching strategy and intended learning outcomes. The data obtained from the interviews supported the results of the questionnaire indicating that CTs utilize their experiences within the classroom while justifying the reasons. When examined in depth, the mentioned teaching strategies were mostly teacher-led ones. The rest of the items were rated as poor in realizing the requirements for performance and objectives of the courses.

As it is seen from the mean scores of the category, the most striking results were mostly related to planning and reflection. Although the expectations scores were very high, the level of competencies of CTs on planning and reflection were around just poor. Although the responsibilities of cooperating teachers were clearly stated in the Faculty-School Cooperation Booklet prepared by the Higher Education Council (HEC), (1998), cooperating teachers seemed not to be aware of their roles and responsibilities. Lesson planning, one of the most important aspects of actual teaching, seemed to be the weak areas where trainees sought much more help from their CTs. The responses given to Items 9, 11, 12, 13

ISSN 2239-978X
ISSN 2240-0524

Journal of Educational and Social Research
MCSER Publishing, Rome-Italy

Vol. 3 No. 7
October 2013

indicated that (mean scores and percentages of the items respectively 2,19/65.1%; 2,26/58.1%; 2,16/57% and 2,20/62,8%) CTs were not competent at preparing and reflecting on lesson planning.

Table 3. Mean scores of the items in the category of mentoring

Items	Expectations	Competency
Item15 Selecting appropriate strategies	4.27	2.67
Item16 Critical feedback upon improvement	4.19	2.84
Item17 Writing performance and objectives	4.35	2.51
Item18 Materials selection	4.41	2.45
Item19 Evaluating the performance	4.14	3.84
Item20 Constructive feedback	4.41	3.15
Item21 Two-way professional talk	4.48	3.20
Item22 Refraining from negative attitudes	4.70	3.77
Item23 Feedback and reflection	4.86	3.91
Item24 Behaving as a colleague	4.85	3.79
Item25 Receptive to new knowledge by trainees	4.91	3.80

In planning and reflection part, trainees' expectations clearly diverged from their experiences. Being different from the pattern in the previous category, the mean scores of the competencies of CTs with respect to mentoring are slightly higher. Only the item about materials selection seems to be lower than the others (mean score 2, 45). In this category, the highest level of competency of CTs is surprisingly related to feedback and reflection. When the data from the interviews and field notes are examined, it is clearly seen that feedback and reflection provided by CTs are mainly about the uselessness of the update techniques and materials used by teacher trainees. In some practicum settings, although the knowledge of CTs in actual teaching serve as an important benefit for teacher trainees, in many instances, CTs do not realize the real value of the teacher trainees' update professional knowledge as it is observed in the current study. Therefore, the practicum becomes artificial and teacher trainees just try to satisfy the CTs and they try to adopt what is already used by CT. In the interview data, the other reason for grading CTs as not competent and poor is claimed as that CTs establish their teaching in advance and not open to the idea of changing their existing routines.

4.2 Expectations versus Experience

Descriptive statistics indicated that teacher trainees had higher expectations scores than the experience scores. (See Table 4). The experiences of teacher trainees deviate from the expectations they had at the beginning of the practicum process. Besides descriptive statistics, a paired sample t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of students' experiences and expectations. The test results indicated that there were significant differences between all the items in pre-practicum and post-practicum questionnaires except one (see Appendix C). Item 19 did not show any significant difference. This item is related to the fairness and objectivity of cooperating teachers while evaluating the teacher trainees' performance. The Interview data revealed that teacher trainees' perceive CTs' roles as an evaluator more than a mentor. Lemlech (1995) also states that, in traditional supervision, many cooperating teachers assume a role similar to that of evaluators.
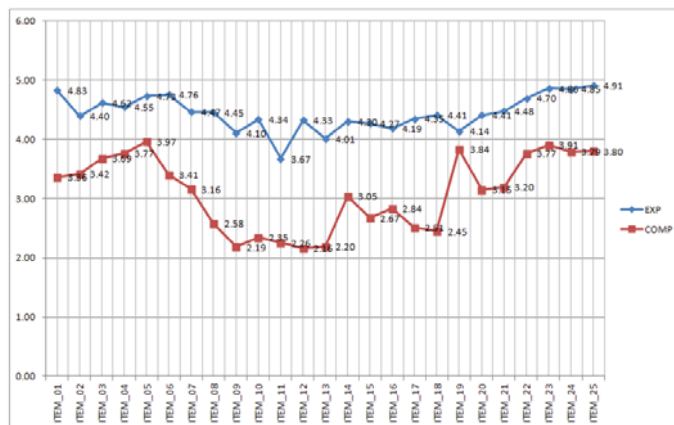

Table 4. Mean scores of the items in expectations and competency questionnaires

As for the match and mismatch between expectations and experiences of trainee teachers, interviews and other qualitative data sources in the study provided insightful results. When the responses given to open-ended questions in the post-practicum questionnaire, the interview results and field notes were analyzed according to the categories, new themes were also defined. These include '*information about the school environment*', '*general techniques in teaching*', '*motivation skills*' '*constructive criticism*' and '*tackling with the individual differences*'. The followings are the extracts taken from the qualitative data mentioned above:

> "...it is not hard to prepare lessons for high achievers...the point is that I don't know how to approach low-achievers and...at first sight I could not discriminate them...when I ask CT, she recommends me to use same material...is it the solution..."
> "...my CT says teaching is 'sink or swim' kind of thing...one day she did not even help to find the photocopy facility in practice school. This is her mentoring perspective..."
> "...only thing she said is 'good, good and good...!'...What is good? How it is done better? I need that information..."
> " I am afraid of my CT...yelling all the time...everywhere... What he said in the classroom changed my perspective to the profession...He found my teaching awful and made negative comments...it [the practicum] was like a nightmare rather than a fruitful process..."

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The current study aimed at exploring what teacher trainees expect from their cooperating teachers and what they really experience with cooperating teachers (CTs) in practice schools. The results of the present study suggest that the teacher trainees rated their expectations from CTs at a higher level than their experiences. This result also indicated a significant difference between expectations and experiences indicating that CTs do not provide sufficient amount of help the teacher trainees expected. The differences between experiences and expectations seem to show the areas in which teacher trainees experience difficulties in practice schools. The areas include orientation in practice schools, lesson planning, selecting appropriate techniques and strategies in ELT, writing performance and objectives for a lesson and developing interpersonal skills with the colleagues. In the present study, the level of help provided in these areas was below the level of teacher trainees' expectations. This finding is in line with the findings of Atputhasamy's (2005) and Ok's (2005) studies where the desired help and actual practice were examined in different areas of teaching.

The level of help provided by the CTs in the areas examined in this study seems to fall short of the expectations of the teacher trainees. Even in the planning and reflection part, where mentoring plays a very important role, the trainees could not get sufficient help. The work load of CTs or insufficient knowledge in the desired area are claimed to be the reason for these inefficient exchanges among CTs and teacher trainees. Whatever the reason is does not change the fact that mentoring is a kind of profession that needs training, time, energy and enthusiasm.

As Smith & Lev Ari (2005), Sanders et al. (2005), Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin & Vasquez Heilig (2005) and Clarke (2006) state the qualifications of both the supervisors and cooperating teachers are very important to reflect on teacher trainees' not only implementation of rules and routines but also their problem solving attempts while teaching. Here, another important question arises about how to select cooperating teachers. Instead of merely making a random selection, the selection might be based on some experiences to reach the optimum conditions in the context of mentoring. The criteria for the selection of CTs are inevitably of great importance for the professional development of teacher trainees. In order to carry out the extra burden, to provide maximum help to the trainee in the course of training process (with qualified feedback and time) and to commit oneself to this work, willingness also becomes important. On the issue, Paker's (2005) study suggests that not every teacher should be assigned as a cooperating teacher and stresses the value of voluntariness.

As a preliminary attempt to understand the expectations and experiences of teacher trainees, this study certainly had some certain limitations. The results are only valid for those who participated in this study. Thus, the number of the participants can be increased to generalize the results of the study. There might be other factors affecting teacher trainees' expectations and experiences in practice schools. These are teacher trainees' achievement level, gender, types of practice school, cooperating teachers' qualifications. Therefore, these factors could be examined in further research. For further research, it would be better if all the parties, namely teacher trainees, CTs and also supervisors, are involved in a research project to analyze the mentorship from different angles.

Consequently, in order to bring closer the expectations and experiences of teacher trainees, initially informative seminars should be arranged by the practicum coordinators of the faculties and authorities from the directorate of

national education. After a reasonable selection of CTs according to the aforementioned criteria, they should be informed about the practicum and then, the teacher trainers should visit practice schools regularly to strengthen the cooperation with the CTs. CTs are also informed about the value of the role of the CTs in the process and their effect in quality teacher education. As Beck and Kosnik (2000) suggested, the cooperation between the teacher trainers and the CTs needs to be strengthened and the teacher trainer should be supportive of the cooperating teacher. To be able to do all those things mentioned above, workload of teachers who are called upon to act as CTs should be adjusted by the principals for effective practicum.

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