



Opinions of Classroom Teachers and Prospective Classroom Teachers about the Learning Difficulties Encountered in the Teaching Process of Reading and Writing*

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ABSTRACT. This case study was carried out with 137 primary school classroom teachers in Kırşehir provincial center and with 100 prospective classroom teachers studying at Ahi Evran University Faculty of Education in the fall semester of the 2007-2008 academic year. Questionnaire form was used in the research as the data collection tool. It is demonstrated in this study that the classroom teachers and prospective classroom teachers who participated in this research do not have the correct information on the nature of reading and writing disorders; but that they have sufficient information on the problems encountered by students with reading and writing disorders; that they may feel scared, upset, worried and insufficient besides the feeling of more responsible when they encounter such students in their classes; that this causes the concern that it will slow down the educational process; that different methods and techniques are thus required; that they have insufficient information on how to cope with these difficulties though they possess the necessary equipment to identify such students; and that the education which they get does not meet this requirement.

Keywords: Learning difficulties, teaching reading and writing, classroom teachers, prospective classroom teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Children of today live in a world which is rapidly transformed by technology that is based on human intelligence. Many children can easily use laptop computers, mobile phones and internet applications to communicate and to obtain information. High amount of and various types of knowledge must be processed in a short time and transformed into products to be able to catch up with the amazing developments. The method to do this is to possess qualified reading and writing skills that were sufficiently acquired at the primary education (Akyol, 2005).

Reading and writing are the basic skills necessary for the person's academic, economic, social, political and personal development (Harris & Spay, 1990; Stanovich, 1986). Nevertheless, many children and adults are having reading and writing difficulties. It is well-known that students who have had problems in acquiring reading and writing skills at the 1st grade of the primary education sustain this problem through all of their educational life, provided that the necessary measures are not taken (Therrien, 2004; Valleley & Shriver, 2003).

Research shows that students who encounter learning difficulties in reading and writing due to some inabilities can, however, learn reading and writing, though at a slower pace than an average student. Nonetheless, it is pointed out that these students will require more time, attention and resources (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities [NJCLD], 1993).

There are different views in the literature on the education of children with reading and writing difficulties. Some scholar maintain that such children must work with special educational professionals in small groups on the problems they encounter for short durations everyday; while those who object this idea argue that this approach could isolate the child from the class, decrease motivation and could create negative impacts on the socialization of the child, and that the professional must implement these

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interventions in the class environment. However, there are also those who maintain that such interventions by educational professionals in the class environment might result in the child seeing himself/herself different than the others in the class, and thus in adaptation problems (as cited in Ziolkowsk, 2007). Due to the reasons mentioned, it is imperative that classroom teachers possess the necessary knowledge on such issues and take care of the children by themselves in order to prevent these problems encountered by the students with reading and writing difficulties. It is thus of great importance that classroom teachers have sufficient information on the nature of reading and writing abilities.

The general purpose of this study is to make an assessment as to what reading and writing difficulty signifies for classroom teachers and prospective classroom teachers; what they already know about learning difficulties encountered in reading and writing process; what they feel/might feel when they encounter students with learning difficulties in reading and writing process; how they identify/will identify students with reading and writing difficulties in their class; what they do/might do as teachers for such students; and as to what their opinions are on the education they obtain on how to overcome the problems students with reading and writing difficulties encounter.

METHOD

This research is a descriptive case study since it aims to identify the opinions of classroom teachers and prospective teachers about learning difficulties encountered in the reading and writing process. Based on the distinguishing characteristics of this research type, it is possible to say that case study is a research method which departs from the questions of 'how' and 'why', and which makes it possible to examine a phenomenon or incident thoroughly that cannot be controlled by the researcher (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005).

Participants

The research was carried out in primary schools in Kırşehir provincial center and in Ahi Evran University Faculty of Education Department of Primary Education in the fall semester of 2007-2008 academic year. The sample of the research consists of 137 classroom teachers in these primary schools and 100 prospective classroom teachers that study in the Ahi Evran University Department of Primary Education, which makes a total of 237 participants. The teachers and students who make up the sample of the research were randomly selected.

Instrument

A questionnaire form was used in this study as the data collection tool. The relevant literature was scanned during the preparation phase of the form, and the questionnaire form was prepared by developing the questionnaire items for trial based on the data in the literature. Some amendments were made in this form based on views of the experts. Based on the pilot implementation, the questions that did not work were eliminated from the form and questionnaire form was finalized with the existing six open-ended questions

Data analysis

The data obtained were first transferred to the computer by using the office program. The texts were read various times line by line and a coding was developed accordingly. The concepts used in the coding were developed based on the literature. The codes that were developed are presented in tables under the questionnaire questions they belong with their frequency of repetition.

RESULTS

This research aims to identify opinions of classroom teachers and prospective teachers about learning difficulties encountered in the reading and writing process. This section presents the findings that were obtained in the descriptive and content analysis. The opinions of classroom

teachers and prospective classroom teachers as to what reading and writing difficulty signifies for them are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Opinions of classroom teachers and prospective teachers about the question of “what does reading and writing difficulty signify for you?”*

	C.T.	P.T.	Total
Mental	51	55	106
Psychological	30	35	65
Difficulty in reading and writing activities	29	40	69
Insufficiency in reading comprehension	41	13	54
Insufficiency in phonemic awareness	15	5	20
Insufficiency of the teacher	9	13	22
Weaker reading and writing skills of students compared to their intelligence, age and class	47	19	66
Problems in oral and written expression	20	-	20
Lack of concentration and motivation	12	-	12

It is observed in Table 1 that the participants generally link reading and writing difficulty to mental and psychological reasons; and that again a high number of participants explain reading and writing difficulty with difficulty in reading and writing activities; insufficiency in reading comprehension; insufficiency in phonemic awareness; insufficiency of the teacher; weaker reading and writing skills of students compared to their intelligence, age and class; problems in oral and written expression; and with lack of concentration and motivation.

Table 2. *Opinions of classroom teachers and prospective teachers about the question of “what can you say about the reading and writing difficulties that primary school first grade students encounter in the learning process of reading and writing?”*

	C.T.	P.T.	Total
Lack of skills (holding the pencil, using books-notebooks, fitting in The line, letter connections)	30	50	80
Unconscious help of the family	41	-	41
Wrong pronunciation of words	15	21	36
Inability to comprehend the sound-letter relation	11	17	28
Skipping letters/syllables/words	15	13	28
Adding/reversing/ following with finger /repetition	1	20	21
Education that does not care for individual differences	12	8	20
Difficulty to link sounds while reading and writing	2	13	15
Lack of concentration	3	2	5
Emotional and social weakness (fear, disinterest, feeling ashamed, feeling of loneliness)	20	-	20
Difficulty in cursive and slanted handwriting	10	-	10
Late reading and writing	8	-	8
Reverse writing (mirror writing)	-	2	2
Not paying attention to punctuation	-	2	2

It is observed in Table 2 that the participants explain the problems encountered in the learning process of reading and writing with lack of skills (holding the pencil, using books-notebooks, fitting in the line, letter connections), unconscious help of the family, wrong pronunciation of words, inability to

comprehend the sound-letter relation, skipping letters/syllables/words, difficulty to link sounds while reading and writing, education that does not care for individual differences, lack of concentration, reverse writing, not paying attention to punctuation, late reading and writing, difficulty in cursive and slanted handwriting, emotional and social weakness (fear, disinterest, feeling ashamed, feeling of loneliness).

Table 3. *Opinions of classroom teachers and prospective teachers about the question of “how does it/may it feel to have students with reading and writing difficulties in your class?”*

	C.T.	P.T.	Total
Insufficiency	45	35	80
Incentive to research	18	14	32
Upset and desperate	13	15	28
That they will try to overcome the problem by using different methods	6	11	17
That they will perceive this situation as a normal one	4	14	18
More responsibility	14	46	60
That it will interrupt the educational process	40		40
That it will reduce performance	6		6

It is observed in Table 3 that when the participants encounter students with reading and writing difficulty; they will feel insufficient, more upset and desperate, more incentive to research, more responsibility, that they will try to overcome the problem by using different methods, that the student with reading and writing difficulty will interrupt the educational process, that they will perceive this situation as a normal one, whereas some participants state that students with reading and writing difficulties will reduce their performance.

Table 4. *Opinions of classroom teachers and prospective teachers about the question of “How do you/could you identify students with reading and writing difficulties in your class?”*

	C.T.	P.T.	Total
Reading and writing exercises	61	76	137
Observing	31	63	94
Making different activities	28	7	35
Consulting with the guidance centers on the problems	15	1	16
Communicating directly with the family of the student	4	3	7
Employing various methods and techniques	5	1	6
Comprehension and expression activities	33	-	33
Comparing with the class average	24	-	24
Question and answer activities	9	-	9
Examining pre-school reports if any	-	1	1

It is observed in Table 4 that the participants indicate that they could identify students with reading and writing difficulties through reading and writing exercises, observing students in the class, making different activities, consulting with the guidance on the problems, question and answer activities, comparing with the class average, comprehension and expression activities, Communicating directly with the family of the student, and through employing various methods and techniques; whereas one prospective classroom teacher states that such students may be identified through examining pre-school reports if any.

Table 5. *Opinions of classroom teachers and prospective teachers about the question of “what do you/could you do as a teacher when you encounter such students?”*

	C.T.	P.T.	Total
Sparing more time and attention	63	34	97
Individual education	59	17	76
Cooperation with the families	47	21	68
Reading and writing exercises	37	27	64
Receiving assistance from experts	33	10	43
Using materials appropriate to the student’s level	32	4	36
Using different methods and techniques	18	18	36
Identifying the problem	19	14	33
Motivation activities	7	8	15
Phonemic awareness activities	8	3	11
Reading techniques (repeated reading, pair reading, peer tutoring etc.)	2	7	9
Giving responsibilities students	2	-	2

It is observed in Table 5 that the participants indicate that they can overcome the problems of students with reading and writing difficulties by sparing more time and attention, cooperation with the families, individual education, receiving assistance from experts, using materials appropriate to the student’s level, using different methods and techniques, while some participants state that they could overcome the problems by giving responsibilities students, holding motivation activities and by using different reading techniques (repeated reading, pair reading, peer tutoring etc.).

Table 6. *Opinions of classroom teachers and prospective teachers about the question of “what can you say about the sufficiency of the education (courses) you obtained on educating students with reading and writing difficulties?”*

	C.T.	P.T.	Total
Insufficient	79	41	120
Sufficient	22	39	61
Theoretical	33	27	60
In-service training is necessary	16	-	16
Resources/colleagues/internet	10	-	10
Professional help is necessary	12	-	12

It is observed in Table 6 that the participants state that the education they received on students with reading and writing difficulties is insufficient, too theoretical, that this process requires professional help, yet some of the participants say that the education they obtain was sufficient. Classroom teachers also note that they need in-service training on reading and writing difficulties, and that they try to cope with such problems by reading resources/in the internet, and by consulting their colleagues.

DISCUSSION

It is demonstrated in this study that the classroom teachers and prospective teachers do not have the correct information on the nature of reading and writing disorders; but that they have sufficient information on the problems encountered by students with reading and writing disorders; that they may feel scared, upset, worried and insufficient besides the feeling of more responsible when they encounter such students in their classes; that this causes the concern that it will slow down the educational process; that different methods and techniques are thus required; that they have insufficient information on how to

cope with these difficulties though they possess the necessary equipment to identify such students; and that the education which they get does not meet this requirement.

Learning difficulty is defined in the classification system of the American Psychiatric Association as “Significantly lower learning skills of the student compared to his/her chronological age, intelligence and the average of his/her own class” (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1994). Learning difficulty is a structural and developmental problem that emerges in reading and writing, in arithmetic and other academic functions despite the normality of mental development.

Research shows that students with reading and writing difficulties encounter such problems as difficulty in reading and spelling, inability to make out the sound-symbol relation, confusing sounds, inability to write letters in line with the required size, skipping words, reversing, completing writing activities later than his/her fellows, making disorderly writing and figures, slow word recognition, pursuing with the finger while reading, going back while reading, losing where he/she is reading, punctuation mistakes, inability to fit writing correctly in the line or page, confusing letters while writing, and lack of focus (Akyol, 2005; Coltheart & Weekes, 1996; Coyne, Zipou & Ruby, 2006; Mather, 2003; Piotrowski & Reason, 2000; Singleton, 2005; Taylor, 2006; Yıldırım & Ateş, 2007).

There are some points that require attention in order for the first grade students to achieve a sufficient level. Activities must be held on identifying sounds and recognizing words which they have in mind as a whole; reading education must be appropriate to the text level, and strategies must be employed according to the purpose of reading (Chafouleas, Martens, Dobson, Weinstein & Gardner, 2004). For continuous development of writing skills of students; activities must be made that will teach proper sitting and will ensure hand-eye coordination and the development of motor skills; students must be assisted for the preference of hand; and students must make sufficient amount of exercises in order for them to get experience on the stance and direction of writing on the paper, and the spaces between words (Akyol, 2005).

Research demonstrates that many students are under risk in terms of reading and writing in the beginning process of reading and writing, though a high number of suggestions are made so as to overcome these problems (NRP, 2000). Stanovich (1999) maintains that we have more information on learning difficulties encountered in the reading and writing process as compared to other learning difficulties. However, Stanovich argues that teachers at the primary education level are incapable of implementing strategies that will eliminate these problems.

Scholars note that the earlier interventions are made for students with reading and writing difficulties, the more success is guaranteed, because long-term research shows that children sustain such problems if this intervention is implemented at a later time. The most appropriate time for this is argued to be the period of 1st grade when the child begins to learn how to read and write. The learning difficulty that could emerge in this process must be overcome before it becomes a permanent behavior (Gaffney, 1994; Hiebert & Taylor, 1994)

The following suggestions are important to ensure appropriate education to students with reading and writing difficulties, to overcome the insufficiency of classroom teachers that will teach in the first grade of primary education on the subject, and to ensure better-equipped prospective teachers.

- It is clear that classroom teachers with insufficient knowledge on identification of and dealing with reading and writing difficulties require in-service training. In-service training courses that could be organized and held by the Ministry of National Education can improve the knowledge and overcome the limitations of classroom teachers.
- The curriculum of faculties that educate classroom teachers should include courses on the nature and types of learning difficulties, on strategies for identification and treatment of students with learning difficulties, and on the persons and institutions that can be consulted.

- More attention and importance to be attached to pre-school education will raise the awareness of families on reading and writing, and will prevent their possible unaware efforts to help.
- Teachers should not assume that parents with children with learning difficulties possess sufficient information on how to assist their children. Teacher should advice parents as to what, how and how much they should read to these children; what they should do when they encounter mistakes; how they should discuss with their children; and as to how they will make these activities enjoyable.
- Academic, social and perceptive development of children with learning difficulties should be observed; the areas where they face difficulties should be identified; and the content of subjects should be altered if necessary.
- Educational classes should be appropriate also for students with learning difficulties and they should be arranged flexibly according to changing requirements.
- Schools should employ educational professionals and consultants specially trained on learning difficulties that will both provide individual education to students with learning difficulties and provide assistance and support to teachers with such students.
- The whole school staff should be trained on child development, individual differences, cognitive development and learning theories, social and emotional development, the nature of learning difficulties and informal assessments.

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