GRADUATE STUDENTS' OPINIONS OF PROFESSORS' COMPETENCIES IN GRADUATE SCHOOLS OF EDUCATION

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Abstract: *The quality of teacher education is closely related to the quality of teacher educators. High quality teacher education requires that teacher educators possess relevant knowledge and skills, professional experiences, and commitment. It also can be assumed that the quality of graduate-level education influences the quality of teacher education since educational departments train future teacher educators. The purpose of the study is to investigate graduate students' opinions about their professors' competencies in terms of facilitating learning, measurement and evaluation, advisement, subject area knowledge, and communication skills. A qualitative research design using in-depth interviews was used to capture graduate students' opinion about graduate educators' competencies. Students' opinions about their professors' competencies were classified under the themes of subject area knowledge, facilitating learning, advisement, measurement and evaluation, communication, and expectations. Findings were discussed under these themes.*

Keywords*:* teacher educators, competencies, Graduate School of Education

Teacher educators' competencies have been critiqued as lacking and may negatively affect teacher education programs. Since the quality of teacher education programs is closely related to the quality of teacher educators, preparation of teacher educators requires serious attention (Zeichner, 2005). High quality teacher education requires that teacher educators demonstrate required knowledge and skills, professional experiences, and commitment. Teacher educators' beliefs about students and their responsibilities to teaching and colleagues also are important (Imig & Imig, 2007). Teacher educators should focus on *how* to teach as well as *what* to teach since subject area knowledge has a strong impact on the teaching professions and teacher expertise (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Teacher educators also should consciously consider their role in teacher education programs and examine their practices as they relate to being role models for their students (Zeichner, 2005). The fundamental responsibility of teacher educators is to provide strong foundational knowledge for teacher candidates while guiding them through their professional development (Smith, 2005).

It also can be assumed that the quality of graduate-level education influences the quality of teacher education since educational departments train future teacher educators. While educating tomorrows' citizens is the responsibility of all those in the field of education, it is especially so of teacher educators and

teachers of teacher educators (Cutchet, 2008, p. 15). While there are many conceptualizations of teacher educators' work across different countries, teacher educators can be generally defined as, "Teachers of teachers, engaged in the induction and professional learning of future teachers through pre-service courses and/or the further development of serving teachers through in-service courses" (Murray, Swennen, & Shagrir, 2009, p. 29). Similarly, Koster, Breekelmans, Korthagen, and Wubbels (2005), define teacher educators as "someone who provides instruction or who gives guidance and support to student teachers, and who thus renders a substantial contribution to the development of students into component teachers" (p.157).

Becoming a teacher educator is not easy, with the transition from being a teacher to becoming a teacher educator seemingly the most challenging and difficult part of this process (Murray & Male, 2005; Swennen, Shagrir, & Cooper, 2009). Facilitation of this transition should be the primary responsibility of educators involved in graduate-level education (EGE). To achieve this, EGEs need to be competent in various areas. However, there seemingly is limited research exploring EGE competencies in the field.

Some countries have set standards for teacher educators. For instance, the Standards for Master Teacher Educators of the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE, 2007) lists competencies across eight fields including, teaching, cultural competency, scholarship, professional development, program development, collaboration, public advocacy, and teacher education profession. The Dutch Association of Teacher Educators (VELON, 2007; as cited in Murray et al., 2009) set similar standards. Arguably, these standards can be viewed as essential competencies for all teachers across all levels of education, with educators requiring competencies in learning facilitation, measurement and evaluation, advisement, subject area knowledge, and communication.

In the past, researchers have attempted to define teachers' and teacher educators' competencies. Some of these studies focused on in-class teacher behaviors that examined common teaching styles and practices. For example, Senemoğlu (1994) found that undergraduate-level educators tended to transmit knowledge to students and expected them to demonstrate the same knowledge rather than encouraged them to think creatively and analytically. They also tended to use evaluation processes for grading purposes only instead of using them as a part of the learning process.

According to Şen and Erişen (2002), the most common teacher educators' behaviors included knowledge of concepts and subject area. In addition, only a few teacher educators demonstrated planning and preparing for class, effective use of teaching-learning strategies, and effective measurement-evaluation skills, confirming earlier work with undergraduate students. Senemoğlu (1987) found that the most commonly observed teacher behavior reported by undergraduate students was the provision of scientifically correct information, while the least frequently observed behavior was the examination of student learning levels. Undergraduate students expected their teachers to have relevant subject area knowledge as well as be good scientists, facilitators, communicators, problem solvers, and objective evaluators of the learning process (Ergün, Duman, & Kıncal ve Arıbaş, 1999).

In this study, we examined competencies of EGEs since these competencies are believed to influence the quality of teacher education. The purpose of the study was to investigate the opinions of graduate

students enrolled in education programs about their professors' competencies in terms of facilitating learning, measurement and evaluation, advisement, subject area knowledge, and communication. It is assumed that the findings of this study will provide insights and suggestions about how to improve the training of graduate students enrolled in graduate schools of education.

Method

King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) indicated that qualitative research designs provide explanatory and descriptive inferences based on empirical information derived from participants' observations and perceptions. Therefore, qualitative research design was used to capture graduate students' opinion of EGEs' competencies in terms of subject area knowledge, facilitating learning, measurement and evaluation, advisement, and communication. Data was derived through in-depth interviews.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 14 graduate students who attended education programs across two universities located in Ankara, Turkey. Seventy-one percent of the sample identified as female (n = 10) and 29% identified as male (n = 4). Eighty-five percent were enrolled in doctoral programs (n= 12), while 15% were enrolled in master's programs (n = 4).

Data Collection and Data Analysis

A semi-structured interview was developed for data collection in order to examine graduate students' opinions about their professors' competencies. The following steps were completed as part of interview development, data collection, and data analysis.

1. An in-depth relevant literature of professor competencies was completed in order to specify the focus of the interview.
2. Seven interview draft questions were prepared. These questions were revised and verified by the suggestions of three subject area experts, a Turkish field expert, and a measurement-evaluation expert. An interview form consisting of 5 questions was finalized based on these experts' recommendations. The final interview form consisted of two parts, with the first part consisting of demographic questions and the second part consisting of questions examining students' opinions of their professors' competencies.
3. Participants completed individual interviews lasting about 20-30 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission. The recorded interviews were transcribed and content analysis was used to analyze the data. Content analysis involved the systematic classification and inference of written, illustrated, or other types of data in ways that allowed the researchers to derive meaningful patterns (Tavşancıl, & Aslan, n.d. p. 2).
4. Data analysis consisted of content analysis processes as described by Elo and Kynagäs (2008, p. 110). Researchers read the interview transcriptions twice independently in order to gain a rich sense of the data set and identify data codes. These codes were then combined and grouped in order to develop themes. The themes were reviewed and revised and classified based on the codes, with five themes emerging: subject area knowledge, learning facilitation, advisement, measurement and evaluation, communication and expectations. Participant quotes were identified and used to support the themes.
5. The researchers examined the qualitative data and engaged in critical

discussion with a subject area expert in order to ensure internal validity. Three subject area experts examined the codes. The codes were further revised based on feedback from these experts.

6. Two subject area experts examined the qualitative data in terms of reliability. Miles and Huberman's (1994, p. 64) formula consisting of dividing the number of conciliations by the total number of conciliations and reconciliations was used to determine the reliability. The inter-rater reliability was 0.85.

Findings

Graduate students' opinions of their professors' competencies were classified under the themes of subject area knowledge, learning facilitation, advisement, measurement and evaluation, communication, and expectations.

Subject Area Knowledge and Learning Facilitation

Table 1 shows the frequency of students' opinions about their professors' subject area knowledge and learning facilitation competencies. Within the subject area knowledge theme, six students indicated problems with professors' competencies

Table 1
Graduate Students' Opinions about Professors' Subject Area Knowledge and Learning Facilitation Competencies: Theme, Code, and Frequency Data

Themes	Codes	Frequency N=14
Subject Area Knowledge	Expert in subject area	4(29%)
	Lacks subject area expertise	6(43%)
	Possesses updated knowledge	5(36%)
	Lacks updated knowledge	6(43%)
	Answers questions	2(14%)
	Has difficulty answering questions	6(43%)
	Provides different perspectives and provides information sources	1(7%)
	Does not present different perspectives	1(7%)

	Does not present empirical research	2(14%)
Learning Facilitation	Leaves teaching responsibilities to students	4(29%)
	Uses teacher-centered approaches	1(7%)
	Uses practice-oriented teaching process	2(14%)
	Uses theory-oriented teaching process	3(21%)
	Requires students to understand knowledge	2(14%)
	Does not require students to understand knowledge	6(43%)
	Engages in unstructured and unplanned course processes	1(7%)
	Guides students in their learning	4(29%)
	Does not guide students in their learning	4(29%)
	Provides surface and improper homework	1(7%)

with respect to answering questions, possessing updated knowledge, and lacking subject area expertise. As one participant explained:

> Our professors tend to lack expertise in their field generally. I don't see them putting any effort to develop and update their knowledge. They don't follow scientific periodicals and they don't bring new developments into the class. Most of the time, they teach and act in a traditional way. In general, most of our professors are not competent academically. I find only one professor competent in the department, since she creates opportunities for me to ask questions and answers my questions satisfactorily. I find the rest insufficient. I don't think that they put any effort to renew,

> update, and develop themselves. (Participant #3)

On the other hand, some of the participants indicated that some professors were keen on their self-development. Five students stated that professors updated their knowledge and four students stated that professors were competent in their subject area knowledge. As one participant explained:

> I think that our professors' competencies of subject area knowledge are okay. I assume that they follow developments in the field at the national and international levels and that they bring new and updated issues and materials into our class. In this way, they enhance our learning capacity and they enrich our learning environment. They share new significant materials about the field with us and facilitate critical thinking. They have always introduced new publications and guide our developments in the field. (Participant #1)

Two participants stated that the reason why professors' do not produce sufficient research is due to their lack of subject area knowledge. One of the participants explained this situation as follows:

> Examining the publications of the professors, it is difficult to see single-authored and quality works. However, someone who has subject area of knowledge and expertise can produce quality work. Therefore, I find most of the professors incompetent. (Participant 9)

Within the theme of learning facilitation, participants indicated problems in different areas. Six students indicated that professors were not successful at facilitating students' understanding. Four students indicated that professors left teaching responsibilities to students and did not guide them in their learning. One of the participants mentioned challenges in all three areas:

> Most of graduate courses consist of student presentations. I think that this is a loss for students since they do not have opportunities to discuss critically and consider topics from multi perspectives. For these reasons, professors cannot guide students and help them understand the knowledge. (Participant #2)

However, four participants stated that professors guided them, two of the participants stated that professors helped students understand knowledge, and two of them indicated that professors mostly emphasized practice oriented teaching.

> I think that professors are good at teaching. Our professors used to gain our attention in the class and motivate us towards the course. Our professors brought different methods, practices, and experiences to the class that provided us with a chance to observe different systems. Most of the courses were practice oriented. My professors were always guiding and mentoring me in my progress. They always helped me understand knowledge and taught me how to engage in problem solving processes to overcome problems in my life. In short, they became a model for our development. (Participant 13)

Advisement and Measurement-Evaluation

Table 2 shows frequencies of students' perceptions on their professors' competencies in the areas of advisement, and measurement and evaluation.

Table 2

Graduate Students' Perceptions of Professors' Advisement, Measurement and Evaluation Competencies: Themes, Codes, and Frequency Data

Themes	Codes	Frequency N=14
Advisement	Does not allocate time	2(14%)
	Is cooperative	1(7%)
	Is not cooperative	1(7%)
	Provides feedback	1(7%)
	Solves problems and supports students	9(64%)
	Does not solve problems and does not support students	2(14%)
	Uses principles of scientific study	2(14%)
	Leaves students alone	2(14%)
	Does not care about students' interests	2(14%)
Measurement-Evaluation	Is objective	4(29%)
	Is subjective	9(63%)
	Uses different measurement techniques	2(14%)
	Does not inform students about evaluation criteria	2(14%)
	Engages in process evaluation	3(21%)
	Engages in product evaluation	3(21%)

In the advisement theme, two participants found that their professors were problematic in terms of caring about students' interests, leaving them alone, solving problems, and supporting students. One of the participants explained that professors do not allocate time for students, help them solve their problems, or support them:

> I don't think that professors allocate enough time for us. I don't feel that I am on their agendas. We always face and overcome our problems, but they tend to talk about why we make mistakes. I don't think that my professors advise me properly. (Participant #5)

On the other hand, nine participants found professors to be competent in assisting students in solving their problems and supporting them. In addition, two participants viewed professors as engaged in scientific research and one thought that professors provided feedback and cooperated with students. One of the participants expressed his opinion as follows:

> My professor has always been actively involved in my learning process. Whenever I ask question she always provided relevant answers and solutions. When needed, she always assisted, guided, and supported me. She always encouraged me to study deliberately in order to improve the quality of my thesis. I have asked so many questions and my professor supported me so well that I couldn't have had a more fruitful dissertation writing process. My professor answered my questions appropriately and this helped my academic progress. Moreover, my professor was good at conducting scientific research and ethics and this improved my research capacity. (Participant 9)

In the measurement and evaluation theme, nine participants expressed problems about their professors' grading subjectivity, two participants indicated that their professors did not inform them about evaluation criteria, and three participants discussed their reliance on product evaluation. One of the participant described professors' measurement and evaluation competencies as follows:

> I don't believe that all professors act objectively. When I disagree with a professor on a specific issue, the professor tends to…grade me negatively. In addition, objectivity fails since the professors do not announce the evaluation criteria to us. This led us to think that the evaluation system might be subjective. If we knew the criteria before, we would have been better prepared for the evaluation. (Participant #5)

However, four participants stated that professors were objective, with two participants stating that professors used different measurement techniques, and three participants indicating that professors conducted comprehensive evaluations of process. One of the participants explained as follows:

> I have never thought that my professors were acting subjectively during my graduate studies. They have always been objective. Evaluation included our exams but also our entire learning process. In this way, our real learning level was measured. In addition, we, as students, also participated in the evaluation process. (Participant 13)

Communication and Expectations

Table 3 lists participants' perceptions of their professors' communication competency and expectations.

Table 3

Graduate Students' Opinions about Professors' Communication Competency and Expectations: Theme, Code, and Frequency Data

Themes	Codes	Frequency N=14
Communication	Encourages students' self-expression	1(7%)
	Does not encourage students' self-expression	2(14%)
	Demonstrates jealousy and engages in gossip	2(14%)
	Is cooperative	3(21%)
	Demonstrates positive/effective communication	7(50%)
	Demonstrates broken communication	7(50%)
Expectations	Demonstrates competency of subject area knowledge	14(100%)
	Implements scientific research principles	4(29%)
	Combines theory and practice	6(43%)
	Engages in interdisciplinary study and cooperation	6(43%)
	Encourages positive class environment	3(21%)
	Provides guidance	7(50%)
	Demonstrates effective/positive communication	7(50%)
	Assumes responsibility for teaching	4(29%)

Seven participants reported problems with their communications with professors, and two students expressed that they had challenges with self-expression, jealousy, and gossip. One of the participants described problems with professors' communication as follows:

> There is an invisible barrier between students and professors. Most of the time students don't feel comfortable. Most people pretend to be fine in order to continue their relations, but they are not sincere in reality. This effects the communication negatively. Also, the communication among professors is problematic. Conflicts among professors are reflected in their students. Therefore, gossip and jealousy occur in the institution. (Participant #3)

On the other hand, seven participants viewed professors' ability to communicate as satisfactory. Three participants stated that professors are good at cooperation and one participant indicated that she could express opinions in class easily and freely. One of the participants described her professors' communication competencies as follows:

> I think that my professors' communication competencies with students and their colleagues are fine. They have good relations with everybody. I witnessed effective communication in the classroom throughout my entire graduate studies. We were able to ask questions and share opinions with our professors. Our professors communicated effectively with everybody and worked collaboratively with others. (Participant 13)

Fourteen participants expressed that they expected their professors to improve and update their subject area knowledge. In addition, six participants said that they expected their professors to merge theory and practice while teaching, with one participant providing the following explanation:

> I expect a proficient educator to have in-depth subject area knowledge and follow the updated developments in the field that he or she is studying. In addition, it is important that effective experiences should be integrated into practice constantly. Knowledge should be presented practically. (Participant 11)

In addition, six participants stated that they expected their professors to cooperate and study in interdisciplinary areas, conduct product and process evaluations, be objective, care about diversity, and provide feedback about the learning process. One of the participants expressed his opinion as follows:

> Subject area knowledge is important but lack of measurement competency can affect the learning process negatively. Measurement and evaluation should be completed through the use of different methods. The measurement and evaluation process should not only focus on the output but also the process. Professors should be fair to all students and provide feedback for everything completed. Also, professors should know about individual differences and use appropriate methodologies based on students' needs. Professors should rescue themselves from traditional standardized implementations. (Participant 10)

Moreover, seven students stated that they expected their professors to advise students while communicating with them and four students indicated that they expected their professors to take teaching responsibility and actively engage students in the

learning process. One of the participants expressed his wishes from his professors as follows:

> Professors should always be with students and guide their students. Of course, the professors should not assume all the responsibility, but they need to take some responsibility for teaching students necessary knowledge and competencies. Professors should be patient and let students feel that they are always with them. They should always have alternative plans and programs and guide their students effectively. Also, professors should create an effective learning environment in a way that student will learn eagerly while having fun. (Participant 8)

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated graduate students' perceptions about their professors' competencies in terms of subject area knowledge, learning facilitation, measurement and evaluation, advisement, and communication. The findings of the study indicated that most graduate student participants believed that their university professors needed to improve their capacities in terms of subject area knowledge, learning facilitation, measurement and evaluation, and communication. Most students indicated that their professors did not possess sufficient subject area knowledge or competence in answering questions. Five students perceived their teachers to possess sufficient subject area knowledge and four students perceived their professors to be sufficient in updating their knowledge.

Some of the students asserted that their professors did not help them in understanding the nature of science and that the learning process was mostly theory based. These results are parallel to Senemoğlu's (1994) findings that undergraduate instructors tended to transmit knowledge to students and expected them to demonstrate the same knowledge instead of encouraging them to think creatively and analytically. The findings here also parallel those of Şen and Erişen (2002) who found that few instructors demonstrated effective use of teaching-learning strategies.

While some students indicated that their professors were not supportive in solving their problems and did not consider their interests, most students responded that their professors were supportive in solving their problems. Teacher educators have an important role during the learning processes that is completely different from the traditional role of the lecturer and the support they offer should be adjusted to the specific problems their students experience (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999).

Some students indicated that there was a negative and ineffective atmosphere among some professors in the department, and this negatively affected the communication between students and professors. This is concerning as future teacher educators' development in part, is supported through their professors' guidance that requires effective communication. As formal and interpersonal communication are essential skills for effective performance of faculty members (Colbeck, Cabrera, & Marine, 2002), faculty development programs that focus on fostering interpersonal communication skills should be implemented in universities.

Most students indicated that their professors were not objective, with three students indicating that their professors used product-based evaluations only. These results parallel Şen and Erişen's (2002) findings that only a few teacher educators demonstrated effective measurement-evaluation skills. Similarly, Senemoğlu (1987, 1994) indicated that the least demonstrated behavior by university

faculty involved examining student learning levels, underlining university faculty's use of evaluation processes for grading instead of as part of the learning process.

Students also indicated their expectations about professors' competencies. The most expected professor behaviors involved possessing subject area knowledge and updating this knowledge. These results are parallel to Bhargava and Pathy's (2011) findings where student teachers ranked knowledge of subject matter and effective communication skills as the most important teaching competencies.

Another highly ranked expectation was that professors should combine theory and practice in their teaching processes. Even though as many teacher educators identified disconnections between theoretical knowledge and teachers' practical work in classrooms (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009), it is important to combine theory into practice in the teaching profession. Combining theory into practice can produce meaningful learning for all students and provide them with role models about how to combine theoretical knowledge into practice.

Students also noted that professors needed to be competent in encouraging student involvement, using scientific principles, working collaboratively and in interdisciplinary areas, using various methods for evaluation, providing feedback about student learning, and guiding students by establishing positive communication. These results parallel Ergün et al.'s (1999) findings that university students expected their teachers to be competent in subject area knowledge, good scientists, good learning facilitators, good communicators, good problem solvers, and be objective when evaluating their performance.

In summary, graduate students expected their professors to be competent in terms of subject area knowledge, learning facilitation, measurement and evaluation, advisement and communication. Since these graduate students are future teacher educators, they deserve quality role models and quality education. EGEs have the potential to positively influence the whole education system. Positive behavioral change among students would start by implementing effective teaching strategies. Therefore, professors should always attempt to develop their professional skills to improve their teaching skills. Through these efforts, teacher education may no longer be viewed as a "haphazard" process (Willemse, Lunenberg, & Korthagen, 2005, p. 214).

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(All titles translated into English by Nuray Senemoğlu)

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