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## A Qualitative Inquiry in the Evaluation of a Pedagogical Course from the Prospective Teachers' Points of View

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## A Qualitative Inquiry in the Evaluation of a Pedagogical Course from the Prospective Teachers' Points of View

### Abstract

Qualitative inquiry has gained importance in the evaluation of educational settings because it provides in-depth information, shedding light on context, situations, or processes. In this study, a qualitative inquiry was undertaken in order to evaluate a pedagogical course from the prospective teachers' points of view. In this case study, data were collected through focus group interviews with three groups of prospective teachers. The lack of putting theories into practice, the lack of relating the topics to teaching life, the lack of attention and participation, and the lack of a variety of materials appeared to be the most essential problems. In this study, the expressed problems and suggestions were discussed in terms of their implications for the improvement of the course.

### Keywords

Evaluation, Course Evaluation, Qualitative Inquiry, Teacher Education, Case Study

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## **A Qualitative Inquiry in the Evaluation of a Pedagogical Course from the Prospective Teachers' Points of View**

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*Qualitative inquiry has gained importance in the evaluation of educational settings because it provides in-depth information, shedding light on context, situations, or processes. In this study, a qualitative inquiry was undertaken in order to evaluate a pedagogical course from the prospective teachers' points of view. In this case study, data were collected through focus group interviews with three groups of prospective teachers. The lack of putting theories into practice, the lack of relating the topics to teaching life, the lack of attention and participation, and the lack of a variety of materials appeared to be the most essential problems. In this study, the expressed problems and suggestions were discussed in terms of their implications for the improvement of the course. Key Words: Evaluation, Course Evaluation, Qualitative Inquiry, Teacher Education, Case Study.*

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Evaluation is defined as “an applied inquiry process for collecting and synthesizing evidence that culminates in conclusions about the state of affairs, value, merit, worth, significance, or quality of a program, product, person, policy, proposal, or plan” (Fournier, 2005, p. 139). There are two main functions of evaluation: formative and summative. The main purpose of formative evaluation is to gather information for program improvement and revision while a program is being developed. On the other hand, summative evaluation focuses on the effectiveness of the total program and encompasses activities carried out in order to provide information to serve decisions or assist in making judgments about program adoption, continuation, or expansion after a program has been implemented for a period of time (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004).

There are two main paradigms underpinning evaluation, in fact all inquiries: positivist (conventional/scientific/rationalistic) and interpretivist (or naturalistic). The qualitative approach to evaluation derived from the interpretivist paradigm emerged later but has radical and promising impacts on educational inquiries (Eisner, 1997). As an impact, various naturalistic evaluation models have arisen like Stake's responsive evaluation (Stake, 1975), Parlett and Hamilton's illuminative evaluation (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972), Eisner's connoisseurship evaluation (Eisner, 1976), Patton's utilization-focused evaluation model (Patton, 1980), Guba and Lincoln's constructivist the fourth generation evaluation model (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), Fetterman's empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 1993), ethnographic evaluation models (Dorr-Bremme, 1985), and the like. These models do not reject the importance of quantitative methods in evaluations but favour the use of qualitative methods. The belief underlying these models is that

naturalistic (qualitative) inquiry provides more meaningful results than those obtained through a rationalistic (quantitative) inquiry because of having advantages such as providing contextually relevant and rich information, being able to capture the subjects' perspectives and the specifics of particular cases through detailed interviewing and observation (Guba & Lincoln, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Furthermore, Eisner (2002) indicates that both qualitative and quantitative inquiries in educational evaluation pay attention to qualities emerging within educational settings and make some value judgments about their educational meanings but he draws attention to the differences that actually reside in the language of disclosure that each uses. He clarifies that in quantitative inquiries, the qualities perceived are transformed into quantitative terms to be able to conduct statistical analyses but this numerical representation of qualities is not structurally analogous to the initially perceived forms of qualities. Whereas, in qualitative inquiries, qualities are described so structurally analogous to the event or object that the reader can envision and experience these events or object indirectly (Eisner, 2002).

Naturalistic evaluation mainly aims to use meanings of human actions to judge the merit or worth of an evaluand by gathering information in a natural way to the setting, expectations, values, assumptions, and dispositions of the participants (Williams, 2005). Therefore, how audiences perceive the evaluand, what their claims or concerns are and what they point out should be taken into consideration within the context. These value judgments should be described and further explored by the evaluator rather than being simply reported. In this respect, Mabry (2003) highlights that the experiences of stakeholders, the meanings they attached to those experiences, and the behaviours that flow from those meanings and change the program determine the quality of a program. It is emphasized that rather than using prescriptive procedures, analysis providing more contextual and complex information and portrayals of subtle nuances and multiple perspectives are required. These challenges have been solved by qualitative evaluators' stakeholder-oriented approaches prioritizing variety in viewpoints and providing vivid descriptions of individuals' responses, reflections, and perspectives to the different programs (Marby, 2003; Royse, Thyer, Padgett & Logan, 2001). Actually, quantitative methods in a conventional quantitative inquiry also reveal useful information in terms of describing some aspects of situations being evaluated and their outcomes. However, these are mainly outcome-focused methods and inadequate in portraying and shedding light on the qualities within context and the experiences of persons affected by the situations, especially in the case that the outcomes of a program, innovation, course, or the like cannot be identified in numbers (Eisner, 1997).

Whatever an educator's methodological stance is, one of the roles of evaluation studies in education is basically to improve and strengthen the evaluand to raise the quality of education. If the main concern is the quality of the education, the improvement of teacher training programs whose aim is to develop teaching skills of prospective teachers and to educate qualified teachers is of importance. For this reason, effectiveness of pedagogical courses in teacher education programs should be evaluated and the quality of instruction should be ensured. In Turkey, for the purpose of raising the quality in teacher education for general, vocational, and technical education, the Turkish National Committee in Teacher Education was established in 1997. Teacher education programs for elementary education in Turkey were reconstructed and the reconstructed programs

have started to be carried out since the 1998-1999 academic year by the Council of Higher Education (CHE). In the 2007-2008 academic year, teacher education programs for secondary education were revised and have been implemented since then. At the same time, attempts toward providing accreditation in teacher education have been started (Ministry of National Education [MONE], 2009).

Besides these endeavours regarding the improvement of the quality of teacher education, there have been attempts to identify teacher competencies by the Ministry of National Education (MONE) since 1995. Lastly, within the scope of the Support to Basic Education Project, the teacher competencies were redetermined through a number of workshops carried out by the MONE General Directory of Teacher Training and Education. The identified six main competency fields were Personal and Professional Values-Professional Development; Recognition of Student; Teaching-Learning Process; Follow-up and Evaluation of Learning and Development; School-Parent-Community Relationship; and Program and Content Knowledge (MONE, 2006). The main purpose of the determination of these competencies is to adjust teacher education programs so as to train prospective teachers equipped with these competencies. One of the pedagogical courses in the programs that are supposed to serve this purpose is the Development and Learning course, whose title was changed in the Teacher Education Faculties for Elementary Schools as Educational Psychology and for secondary education as Development Psychology in 2006-2007 (Council of Higher Education, 2007). Because, within these competency fields, the *Recognition of Student* domain comprises competencies regarding knowledge and skills for students' learning and development and this course taking part in all teacher education programs aims to provide educational opportunities toward the attainment of these competencies required in the subsequent courses, in the teaching practice, and in the teaching profession.

Concerning the Development and Learning course, Yıldırım, Güneri, and Sümer (2002) point out its necessity by counting these skills and knowledge about students' learning and development among effective teaching characteristics that a good teacher should possess. In addition, Senemoğlu (2001) indicates that since educational environment and teaching-learning process have essential roles in learning, it is very crucial to have knowledge of development and learning not just for teaching but also for curriculum development, instructional design, implementation and assessment. Furthermore, Peterson, Clark, and Dickson (1990) assert that whatever programs or designs emerge as a result of the improvement in teacher education programs toward meeting the 21st century's challenges, each will include a course in relation to human learning and development indispensably. For these reasons, this course, as a compulsory part of teacher education programs, is to be taught effectively so as to raise qualified prospective teachers. However, there is a lack of course evaluation studies regarding this course. In existing studies, the course has been evaluated as a part of whole teacher education courses (e.g., Kılıç & Acat, 2007; Ünver, Bümen, & Başbay, 2010) or a new instructional method had been implemented in this course and the outcomes such as impact on academic achievement (e.g., Cengizhan, 2007; Erdamar & Demirel, 2008; Şendağ & Gündüz, 2007; Yücel, 2008) were evaluated. On the other hand, among these existing studies, course evaluations via a qualitative inquiry have not been encountered widely in teacher education and this deficiency addresses the necessity of studies in this respect.

In light of this information, in this study, we evaluated the Development and Learning course from prospective teachers' points of view by using a qualitative inquiry in order to have an in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of the course by taking these essential stakeholders' views into account as an affected side. The purpose of this formative evaluation study was to determine deficiencies, expectations, and needs that would lead to the improvement of the instruction of the course. Therefore, we presumed that this student-based qualitative course evaluation study would demonstrate how deep and rich information gathered from the students could be informative in terms of instructors to improve their own course and in terms of the course itself to be taught effectively. We expected that this study would contribute to the deficiency in literature and would shed light on the ways of educators and researchers who attempt to carry out similar studies demonstrate.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

We carried out a case study in this evaluation study. Yin (2003) defines case study as "the method of choice when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context. Such a phenomenon may be a project or program in an evaluation study." (p. 4). In this study, the Development and Learning course was the case. Stake (2000) mentions three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Intrinsic case studies are carried out in order to provide better understanding of a particular case because of an intrinsic interest in the case such as child, clinic, conference, or curriculum. Instrumental case studies are slightly different, in that they are undertaken in order to provide insight into a case that is of secondary interest and aids and supports understanding of something else. If the purpose of a case study is to study a number of cases jointly, this is collective case study (Stake, 2000). In terms of this classification, this study is an intrinsic case study.

### **The Researchers' Role**

We have been teaching pedagogical courses and are experienced in curriculum evaluation and qualitative research. The first author has been teaching the Development and Learning course since 2002. At the same year, she started a doctoral program on "Curriculum and Instruction" in Middle East Technical University and completed in 2008. Her knowledge and skills gained throughout the courses in the PhD program led her to think about the courses that she has been teaching. Since then, she has been striving to improve her courses on behalf of the development of prospective teachers' teaching skills and knowledge in the belief that there is always a need for improvement of programs or courses. Her experiences also led her to notice problems that have been observed or expressed by students such as a high number of students having low grades on the exams, lack of participation, and difficulty in understanding development and learning theories. Therefore, this study was an attempt to evaluate the Development and Learning course for the purpose of identifying effective and ineffective aspects of the course and determining the points that need to be improved. She was the interviewer, as

well. It was thought that the students would be more comfortable to be interviewed by a known person. Otherwise, building trust to an interviewer not known and being sincere could have taken time in the interviews and so the credibility of data collected in this way could have been questioned (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). One might have a doubt about bias that might be deduced from the researcher herself. Yet, we intended to find weaknesses of the course as well as strengths in order to improve it without having a concern of accountability or accreditation by an external agency or faculty; thus, we did not have any hypotheses or expectations that would affect the interpretation of the results. Moreover, in order to overcome potential impact caused by the researcher on the interviews, we strongly encouraged the students to make critiques about the course and feel free to explain negative aspects of the course, we highlighted the importance of expressing negative points for the course improvement several times during interviews, and we did not ask any question about the instructor of the course directly. In this regard, it is indicated that if students are interviewed by a faculty who are also currently or would be grading them, they would not feel comfortable in giving negative feedback (Ponsford & Masters, 1998) but in the present study, by the time the focus group interviews were conducted, the instructor as interviewer was not teaching and would not be teaching any course in their program. As Patton (2008) utters, in this qualitative inquiry, we prefer to describe ourselves as open rather than subjective and conducted this study “without prejudgement, including no preconceived hypotheses to test”. (p. 451). We aimed to discover meaningful insights into the course’s instruction from the students’ points of view and to provide vivid description of how they responded to it.

### **The Case: Development and Learning Course**

In this study, the Development and Learning course taught in a vocational teacher education faculty in Turkey was evaluated. Prospective teachers can register to the faculty based on their university entrance exam scores after completing their vocational secondary education. The duration of the vocational teacher education program is four years and prospective teachers take pedagogical courses, subject courses, and common courses (e.g., electives, history, and language) during the program concurrently. The Development and Learning course, a pedagogical course taught in the second year, aims at equipping prospective teachers with skills, knowledge, and attitudes about development (i.e., physical, cognitive, language, moral, personal) and learning (i.e., theories, principles and rules).

Since prospective teachers will be responsible for their students’ learning and development, they will struggle with questions like how they will plan effective lessons, how they will arrange an effective learning environment and teaching-learning process, how they will deal with discipline problems, how they will motivate their students to learn and how they will explore the students’ talents, potentials and learning styles. In this respect, the effectiveness of the course itself is critical because of providing basic knowledge to attain the abovementioned responsibilities. For this reason, in this study, we evaluated this course from prospective teachers’ points of view in order to enlighten issues that need to be considered in modifying the course and considered the expressed deficiencies and problems as necessary improvement points. Before conducting this

study, we informed the faculty dean about the study and obtained their approval and permission (APA, 2010).

## **Participants**

In this study, we held focus group interviews with three groups of students from sophomore, junior, and senior levels in a vocational teacher education program in the 2005-2006 academic year with the assumption that these students who had already taken this course recall the course with acceptable clarity. We selected six students from each grade level; thus, 18 students, in total, participated in the study.

Since different views of the students are of importance, differentiation among them in terms of basic characteristics was taken into account in the selection of the participants and in the composition of the groups. In this respect, while most researchers suggest homogeneity within each group in order to take advantage of people's shared experiences, heterogeneity is also supported due to the fact that it is possible to maximize exploration of different perspectives in this case (Kitzinger, 1995). An interaction between participants is a key feature of the focus groups method thus there has to be sufficient diversity to encourage discussion but if groups are too heterogeneous there might be conflict especially in a case where participants hold radically firm and opposing views such as strong allegiance to different political parties or there might be silence in a case where status and power of participants differ (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). Actually, in terms of group composition, there is not any consensus (Fern, 2001; Lichtman, 2010), what has to be taken into account is the research question. In this evaluation study, the main purpose was to reveal different perceptions and opinions in relation to the course. For this reason, from each grade level (i.e., sophomore, junior and senior), six students were selected according to their gender and Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) by the maximum variation sampling method, which is a purposeful sampling technique aiming to reflect variations among individuals in the sample (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). The reason for this criterion was to provide greater perspective in each focus group. We anticipated that students' gender and academic level may affect their perceptions toward the course and through focus group interviews with these heterogeneous groups, we allowed them to voice their opinions to provide richness. Homogeneity within groups was not preferred because the aim of the study was not to compare groups' opinions in terms of gender and CGPA but to elicit students' opinions and suggestions for improving the course. Furthermore, conflict caused by radically opposed views and silence because of status and power were not the concern of the study. In this context, in the first interview, nothing happened disproving this assumption; thus, the composition of the subsequent groups did not change. Actually, in the first author dissertation (Yücel, 2008), she had conducted focus group interviews with heterogeneous groups. Since she did not experience any problems arising from interviews with heterogeneous groups, her reflections from these interviews have led us to carry out interviews with groups involving students having different characteristics in this study.

Besides, the reason for conducting three separate group interviews for each grade level was the differentiations in the instruction of the course at these grade levels. When the senior students took this course, the main teaching methods were lecturing and

questioning. At the end of each lesson, they participated in a follow-up test and in the last weeks, they did presentations about how the development and learning theories covered in the course can be applied in teaching settings. The following years, when the junior and sophomore students took the course, the flow was changed. The instructor removed presentations and instead, she requested students to perform drama in relation to learning theories. Students in the class were divided into groups and a learning theory was assigned to each group. They were asked to find and play real life instances of learning theories. Therefore, students were supposed to understand the given theories, transfer it to real life and find a real life instance so as to adapt theories into drama properly. Then, they were expected to write a script for that real life instance including roles for each member of a group and play it accordingly. As seen, the teaching-learning process of the course has changed in due course; thus, the students' responses and comments especially regarding the teaching methods of the course differed by their grade levels. This explanation regarding the flow of the course in different grade levels would also provide a better understanding of their responses given in the results section.

Concerning the selection of students, we took their CGPA scores from the Office of Student Affairs; then for each grade level, we ordered these scores in a descending order and divided into three groups. The upper group was categorized as high CGPA group, the middle group as middle CGPA group, and the lower group as low CGPA group. One male and one female student from each group were selected from each group randomly. One more male and one more female substitute students were also selected. These substitute students would take place of the initially selected ones in case that these primarily selected ones would not be volunteer or available. We informed the primarily selected ones about the study and asked if they would like to participate in this focus group interview voluntarily. All students accepted to take part in this study and participated in the interviews. In order to eliminate the effect of CGPA score differences among the students, they were not informed about the selection process. As a result, there were three focus groups with six students in each (a female and a male with low, middle, and high CGPA score: 2 X 3) and 18 in total.

Students were treated according to the Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2005) and the Ethical Principles of American Psychological Association for research and publication (APA, 2010). The interviews were conducted by the instructor of the course (the researcher herself) but she did not use her influence over the students to compel them to participate in the research. Actually, at the time of interviewing, the students had already taken the course so she was not their instructor of any course that they were taking or would be taken. Therefore, there was no exploitation for personal gain of the students or of the faculty (AERA, 2005). Informed consent was obtained from each student at the beginning of the interview. They were informed about the study purpose, use of the results, time of the interview, anonymity of their name in the results, their right to ask questions or to withdraw from the study at any time, the use of tape record for recording and their right to take the cassette or interview notes if they would feel uncomfortable (AERA, 2005; APA, 2010). For the preservation of confidentiality and anonymity, the students' characteristics were coded and these codes were used when presenting the results (Table 2). The interviewer strived to make individuals aware that their participation was important, valuable, and beneficial for the research, for the faculty, and for the future students.

## **Data Collection**

The importance of perceptions and values of students as a part of stakeholders in evaluation is emphasized (Marby, 2003; Royse et al., 2001). In this context, we conducted in depth focus group interviews as a way of gathering information in this study. Focus group interviews provide deep, detailed, and useful qualitative information and therefore illuminate evaluators in making decisions regarding education programs, curricula, courses, materials, and other related issues under investigation (Popham, 1993). There have been a number of studies revealing that students' informative feedback obtained through focus group interviews is of more value for the instructional improvement in higher education institutions because of generating substantive data especially in comparison with the survey method, which is more popular in most universities (e.g., Bangura, 1994; Hamilton, Pritchard, Welsh, Potter, & Saccucci, 2002; Paulsen & Feldman, 1995; Ponsford & Masters, 1998).

The reasons for preferring focus group interview as opposed to individual interviews were based on the following advantages: In focus group interviews, a less stressful environment and more natural atmosphere than individual interviews are experienced and a stimulating interactive process within the focus group allows group members to participate in the interview process (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Madriz, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Moreover, it is much more possible for participants to explore and clarify their views, compared to individual interviews (Kitzinger, 1995). For these reasons, in focus group interviews, rich and detailed information can be obtained and interviewing reaches its goal (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Low cost, quick-results, and reaching more people at one time are the other advantages (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008).

On the other hand, interviewers may encounter difficulties in controlling participants and the interview may wander from the main focus. At those times, interviewers' role gains importance. For this reason, in the study, as a precaution, the interviewer asked open-ended questions one by one in a consecutive manner. Moreover, when the students did not understand questions or the interviewer did not understand their responses, probing questions were asked in order for clarification and when the participants wanted to say or add something or make a comment, they were allowed to speak. Meanwhile, preserving their focus on the questions was also taken into account. This semi-structured interview was preferred since it provides a comparison of responses across students and groups and it decreases bias and subjectivity encountered in unstructured interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008).

The interview comprised ten questions (Appendix A). Four instructors in the field of Educational Sciences reviewed these questions in order for content and face validity of the instrument. Based on their suggestions, we made revisions on some parts and used the final form of the questions in each focus group interview. All responses were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to minimize the potential impact of the researchers' interpretation and remembering and being too selective and to reduce possible distortions (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003; Wolcott, 1990). The first author as the instructor conducted and transcribed interviews. The reason for being the same person as an instructor and interviewer was that she was the one who could know the course structure and instruction very well so she had a better chance of gathering more in-depth

information than anyone else. In order to ensure believability of this study's results, evidences from the students' speeches were presented (Lichtman, 2010). Interviews were conducted in Turkish; thus, quotations from speeches were translated into English and two English teachers (a native and a Turkish) reviewed the quotations.

## Data Analysis

The data obtained through focus group interviews were subjected to content analysis. The purpose of the content analysis was to reveal the underlying issues and themes about issues (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). Firstly, the data obtained from interviews were coded. Codes are defined as tags or labels giving meaning to the descriptive or inferential information gathered from data during a study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In determining codes, an inductive coding method was followed; that is, codes describing the data were generated after data were reviewed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The first transcribed data were scrutinized, keeping the conceptual framework of the study and research question in mind. When reading through the data, utterances that account for or point out the effectiveness of the course were identified and codes (name) were given in the margin and these codes were listed as seen in the example given in Table 1.

Table 1. *An example of coding*

Time	Transcript 1	Codes
1:08:47	S44FH - Well...The instructor should not have explained everything. [You mentioned at the beginning then you assigned topics to each student and we presented [these topics]. But as I said before it [presentation] was not beneficial at all. To be honest, the presenters went out to the blackboard after having been prepared. Ok...I do not know how beneficial it was for him/her but in terms of the other students in the class, I do not think it was really beneficial.]	7.6 (Problem in learning topics presented by a student)

The same code might appear in different places within a transcription. In other words, in determination of codes, the interview questions were not considered as a reference; wherever similar expressions appeared the same codes were assigned. The same code sometimes was observed at the beginning and sometimes at the end of the interviews. The second and third transcriptions were then examined closely and compared for similarities and differences; that is, comparative analysis was used in order to differentiate one theme from another and to identify properties and dimensions specific to that theme (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The same codes were used for similar incidents across transcripts. This made conceptually similar patterns to group together under a higher-level descriptive concept. But when a distinct expression related to the effectiveness of the course was observed, a different code was given and that code was added to the code list. In order to provide consistency between codes and the corresponding utterance across groups, the transcribed data were reread over and over again and the identified codes were compared within and between transcripts. This was also an action to provide more valid findings and called as constant-comparative method

by Silverman (2000). The code list was checked in terms of synonymy. The synonym or similar codes were combined. Then, these codes in the list were reviewed again and the related codes were classified into broader categories/themes. Ten themes unifying the related codes were determined (Appendix B). When the preliminary themes were established, data were searched again to find evidences confirming and disconfirming these themes. The former ones were treated as strengths of the course and the latter ones were considered as weaknesses of the course. All these evidences had been already coded but now categorized under the corresponding theme. As seen from the code list (Appendix B), there were codes for negative and positive instances under almost all themes. In this way, themes and codes under each theme were listed. After codes and themes were determined, they were organized in a meaningful manner by taking scope of the study into consideration. The data analysis procedure, codes and themes were audited by a peer in order to verify the rigor of the study and confirmability of the data, to maximize accuracy and to minimize bias (Patton, 2002). Member checking could not be established because these interviews were conducted before final exam week so it was hard to find them and to consume their time to check the results.

### **Trustworthiness of the Research**

From an interpretivist point of view, the positivist (scientific) criteria of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity for evaluating the trustworthiness of research are replaced by the terms credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, respectively (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In the current study, some actions were taken in order to guard against threats to the quality of the inquiry and increase the probability of the study's trustworthiness.

An inquiry is credible to the extent that it takes accounts of interlocking factor patterns causing problems in interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For ensuring credibility of the study, peer debriefing, triangulation, and establishing structural corroboration or coherence were applied. The researchers interacted and discussed the study, its methods and findings with each other and colleagues in the faculty during study in order to detach themselves from the study, to deal with questions posed by peers and to be able to notice possible factors that might affect the study. Patton (1999) defines triangulation as "a process by which the researcher can guard against the accusation that a study's findings are simply an artifact of a single method, a single source, or a single investigator's biases" (p. 1197) and explains its four types; methods triangulation, triangulation of sources, analyst triangulations, and theory/perspective triangulation. Although, the lack of an adequate and robust triangulation process was the limitation of the study, the comparison of the perspectives of students according to grade level might be regarded as the triangulation of data sources because when identifying themes, we strived to provide consistency in overall patterns of data gathered from focus groups. Major differences across groups from different grade levels were in the reflections towards teaching methods in the course and this was explained in the data sources section above.

Patton (1999) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicate that reporting alternative and rival classifications, themes, and explanations and finding evidences during data analysis in order to ensure best fit between data and analysis are of importance for the credibility

of findings and the establishment of corroboration and coherence. For this reason, in the study, while codes and themes were determined, data were scrutinized and compared to find supportive evidences but alternative or unsupportive ones were taken into account under different codes if it was relevant to the effectiveness of the course instruction.

A qualitative inquiry is context-bounded therefore its results cannot be generalized but its transfer to other context might be achieved. In order to make possible to decide fittingness of the study context with other possible context and to match methodological characteristics of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1999), a thick and detailed description of case, data sources, data collection, and analysis procedures was given. Besides, use of a purposeful sampling technique, maximum variation sampling method, in the study also made possible to have typical and divergent data in a studied context to maximize the range of information uncovered and thus to increase transferability (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Gender and achievement level differences are typical situations in classes but their reflections toward a course might differ; thus, in this evaluation study, these criteria were taken into account.

Concerning confirmability, a peer, who was experienced in qualitative research, was asked to be auditor to review data, codes, themes, and results and to check consistency. Another issue that might affect the trustworthiness of the study is the credibility of the researcher (Patton, 1999). In the study, a section was left for the researchers' role.

## Results

The aim of this study was to identify the prospective teachers' opinions shedding light on issues that would be considered in improving the course. As a result of data analysis, we extracted ten main themes from transcripts of three focus group interviews. The identified themes were "relevance to real life and teaching profession," "attention," "participation," "effectiveness of drama," "effectiveness of questioning technique," "effectiveness of lecturing," "effectiveness of student presentations," "effectiveness of follow-up tests," "suggestions for instructional methods," and "suggestions for instructional materials" (Appendix B). We compiled utterances related to the codes underneath each theme. In this section, we organized these responses and presented the points that they addressed under the related themes' headings by giving some quotations from the students' responses corresponding to these themes. In order to preserve confidentiality, we used the codes in Table 2 instead of the students' names.

Table 2. *Codes for the Prospective Teachers Who Participated in the Focus Group Interviews*

For the Sophomores (2 <sup>nd</sup> grade)	For the Juniors (3 <sup>rd</sup> grade)	For the Seniors (4 <sup>th</sup> grade)
S <sup>a2</sup> b <sup>1</sup> c <sup>F</sup> d <sup>M</sup> e <sup>e</sup>	S31ML	S41MM
S22FL	S32FH	S42FM
S23MH	S33MH	S43FL
S24MM	S34FL	S44FH
S25FH	S35FM	S45MH
S26ML	S36MM	S46ML

a = student; b = grade level; c = student's number; d = gender (F, for Female; M, for Male); e = CGPA level (L, for low; M, for middle; and H, for high CGPA)

### Relevance to Real Life and Teaching Profession

We recognized that if the relation of topics to real life and the teaching profession was set up properly, the students considered these topics important for the teaching profession and learned them better. Otherwise, they indicated that they had problems in learning and thus perceived themselves incompetent in these topics.

The students mentioned that if they could use what they learned in real life, they remember those topics better. For example, S21FM indicated that she observed and talked about the development of her relatives' children. S22FL and S24MM said that the things covered in the topics such as moral development and cognitive development were already in their life; thus, they felt competent in these topics.

These are topics that we need to know in our life. Especially, topics in development part...We have been passing through these stages, as well. For this reason, these topics were attractive (S24MM).

In addition, other participants emphasized the impact of the relevance of the topics to teaching profession on learning:

As I would like to be teacher and these topics were related to interaction [with students], the topics on cognitive, moral and physical development attracted my attention more (S33MH).

These topics were those that all teachers should know. We are supposed to know the developmental stages of a student (S34FL).

Among the senior students, S41MM and S44FH expressed that the topics supported with examples from real life were retained longer. As for S42FM, the topics that she was able to put into practice in her presentations in other courses and in teaching practice had helped her to remember well. Likewise, S45MH said:

The topics I feel competent are the ones that I can relate to real life and my experiences.

On the other hand, S45MH indicated that he felt incompetent in the topics that he could not understand the relation with reality and were not attractive:

I could not relate these topics to reality...We say that there are individual differences in development. For example, we talk about physical and linguistic development. A baby walks and sits when it is 10 month old. It crawls when it is six-month old. Its height is this, its weight is this. These are things that I need to memorize or even if I do not memorize, I feel as if these are not real or true. Therefore, these topics never attracted my attention. I do not feel competent in these topics (S45MH).

S34FL, feeling highly incompetent in this course, indicated that the course topics were not important for the teaching profession and so she did not need to know or to learn. From her response quoted below, we realized that since there were lots of theories but not practice, she did not understand how these theories would be used in the teaching profession:

There are theories but I do not understand how we are supposed to practice. For example, classical conditioning, I remember dog, salivation, meat, etc but do not know how can these be helpful in term of instruction? How can we practice it in an educational setting? This was not clear. I have always questions in my mind... Why are we examining the theories? We should learn what we are supposed to do with these (S34FL).

The lack of practice was expressed by S32FH as a reason of feeling incompetent, as well:

For instance, instructional techniques, methods and strategies were mentioned. But how we put them in practice properly, how we use them and an application of these were never demonstrated by anyone....

In sum, on the one hand, the students expressed the relevance of the topics to real life and teaching profession as an effective factor for learning; on the other hand, they emphasized the lack of putting theory into practice as a reason for feeling incompetent in the course.

### **Attention**

Students, in general, indicated that they felt competent in the topics that drew their attention because of being attractive, interesting, striking, and entertaining. These topics were physical, cognitive, moral, and personality development, classical conditioning, social learning theory, and motivation topics.

I remember the topics about development because these were entertaining...the others I felt competent, always attracted my attention (S21FM).

S22FL mentioned that since she did not want to become a teacher and the topics were not attractive or interesting for her she did not study much in this course. The others' responses showed that being too abstract even far from practice or being verbal affected the attractiveness of the topics negatively. By expressing being too abstract or being too verbal, the students meant that topics were including too much theoretical information rather than practical information that would show how to put theory into practice. Therefore, they felt incompetent in the topics such as linguistic development, operant conditioning, gestalt theory, and information processing theory.

Gestalt theory was meaningless for me. It was our drama topic; we endeavoured but could not understand...We found it unnecessary...Gestalt and Information Processing theory were too much verbal. That is, these are theories to be memorized. I do not have anything in my mind...Since these were too verbal, I could not pay attention (S21FM).

Drama about the Gestalt theory was great but I do not remember anything since these topics were too verbal (S25FH).

## **Participation**

Results showed that students were rarely involved in the teaching-learning process of the course. This was mainly because of students' characteristics such as shyness, unwillingness, and apathy. They said:

I never participated in the class because it was a theoretical course. I do not like such courses; I cannot listen and pay attention. Thus, I did not participate (S42FM).

I participated into the class physically not cognitively because this course did not attract my attention (S33MH).

The theoretical courses do not attract my attention. I have difficulty in understanding. I participate into courses based on calculation; mathematic but theoretical courses do not attract my attention so I did not show any participation [in this course] (S22FL).

In spite of being not many, those who reported active involvement mainly expressed that course requirements (e.g., presentation, assessment), instructor's call on individual students to answer a question and interesting course topics were the reasons for participating.

I did not participate unless I was forced to do. But, for example, if a question was asked, if we were supposed to present a topic, I participated. Except for these cases, I was not an active person. I preferred to sit and listen (S43FL).

When [the instructor] asked a question...Let's say, if my name was called on from the list, I answered...Otherwise, I did never raise my hand to answer or participate (S34FL).

Like my friend [S34FL], I did not generally raise my hand to ask or answer to a question. When [the instructor] asked me, I said offff she asked me again!... At that time, we were left no chance other than to answer unwillingly (S35FM).

In short, it appeared that even those who were involved in the teaching and learning process, were not willing and motivated to do so.

### **Effectiveness of Drama**

As mentioned above, there was a shift in the methods between the years when the senior students took this course and when the others did. Therefore, the seniors did not express any opinion about drama since they did not experience it in the course at that time.

**Enjoyable learning environment.** S25FH and S26ML said that the drama was so entertaining that they enjoyed this course very much and remember knowledge gained throughout this course better. Similarly, S34FL and S36MM agreed that drama was entertaining. Even, S34FL said,

*I enjoyed it so much that I wish all courses were like this one.*

**Impact on learning.** The students' responses showed that drama was an effective method for learning and retaining topics only if their relation with topics was presented appropriately. S31ML thinks of drama as a useful tool in learning in the case that his friends successfully integrated the topics. He pointed out that in other cases, they had just watched instead of trying to understand. S22FL, S24MM, and S25FH mentioned that they understood topics better due to drama, especially when topics were adapted to drama very effectively.

I learned the topics very well, while watching drama... As I am not good at theoretical courses, I cannot retain any knowledge in my mind...whatever I have learned was due to drama...I could understand the classical conditioning and the operant conditioning easily...Rather than the instructor's lecturing, drama helped me to understand (S22FL).

Drama that my friend performed on the topic of classical conditioning was very successful. For this reason, I think I understood it very well (S25FH).

When the relation between drama and topic was set properly, when the topics were adapted to the drama successfully, drama was so effective that I never forget (S25FH).

While preparing our own drama...Because when you are involved in it and also strive to relate drama with topics, the topics are retained easily...[Thus] drama was effective in learning particularly our own drama topic (S31ML).

While the students mentioned drama as an attractive and enjoyable method, they stressed its negative impact on learning because of having problems in adapting topics to drama. S25FH expressed that the drama performed in Operant Conditioning was not effective in relating to the content of the topic thus she could not understand that topic. Similarly, S23MH and S21FM uttered:

I do not think drama was beneficial for me in understanding the lesson...I think it caused more confusions. I could not understand the topics...In my opinion; I would remove drama from the course because our friends could explain topics partially. Since they could explain partly, we could understand partly (S23MH).

We were not able to recognize the theories in drama very well. Our friends could not achieve to adapt topics to drama (S21FM).

When we started to perform drama, I could not learn anything. Because we were having fun, drama was amusing but adapting theories into drama was very hard...The instructor's lecturing was very effective, what was explained is still in my mind (S32FH).

In this regard, S32FH insisted a few times in her speeches that they had fun but she did not understand anything from drama on account of the failures in adapting topics to drama. On the other hand, S34FL disagreed with her that drama was effective even if there were problems because the instructor explained and complemented these missing points or problems after the presentation of each drama was over.

**Impact on thinking skills.** The sophomore and junior students pointed out the impact of drama on their thinking skills while preparing and watching. Especially, in terms of creativity, drama was considered beneficial since it made them think and produce creative opinions about how the given topics can be associated to real life so as to play in drama and how it can be presented. This result can be clarified by verbatim quoting from students' interview records.

We were the first group and presented classical conditioning. We put on the play first without knowing how to do it. Our performance was not good. Our group came together again after our performance. So many different good ideas emerged. After watching our friends' drama and listening to the instructor's examples from previous years, we presented our second drama. This was better than the previous one (S22FL).

We did truly brainstorming before we present our drama. During a week, we just thought [drama] continuously. Everybody proposed an idea. For this reason, I think that drama contributed to the development of my thinking skills (S25FH).

It was seen that drama stimulated them to think of relating drama to the presented topic;

[Drama] contributed to thinking of which part of our friends' drama was related to which principles of the given theory (S26ML).

**Impact on the students' personality.** The impact of drama on the students' personality such as overcoming nervousness of speaking in front of people and gaining self-confidence and courage was stressed by S22FL, S23MH, S34FL, S35FM and S32FH. For instance, S22FL and S34FL expressed:

I cannot stand in front of people, I do not feel comfortable. Due to drama, I could overcome this fear partly. I can more easily speak and act in front of people now (S22FL).

[The instructor] set a stipulation to perform drama; otherwise no one could dare to present a topic...It improved our self-confidence. As I played a role for the first time, my self-confidence improved. I said 'I can do this!' (S34FL).

Because of these influences on the students' personality, S32FH thinks that drama should take place in the course even though she still disagreed with its effectiveness on learning and retention. S22FL, S21FM, S24MM and S25FH also agreed that drama should be kept in the class because of its aforementioned pros. Whilst the senior students did not perform drama while taking this course, they wished that they had performed drama or other types of educational games in order to have better learning, understanding, and retention, to pay attention, and to put theories into practice.

### **Effectiveness of Questioning Technique**

Questioning was one of the main teaching methods in the course. Questions were frequently asked to students to explore an issue, topic, theory, concept, or principles or to make comments on an incidence or case related to a given topic during a lesson. About

questioning, S34FL indicated that it made students to listen carefully. S36MM even mentioned how a question allowed him to pay more attention to the course.

One day [the instructor] had asked me a question; I had given a ridiculous answer. Then, the course attracted my attention...At that moment; I realized that when I enter a class, if a student does the same thing to me, what would I do? Then I realized how this course is important.

Because of providing better understanding and more participation, questioning was mostly preferred method among the senior students. Besides these, several suggestions regarding questioning were presented. S33MH and S44FH stated that questioning should take place at the end of each session. S44FH said:

In the last fifteen minutes of the lesson, questions like how we can apply what we have learned when we become teachers might be asked and the students might be asked to give examples...There might be brainstorming. In my opinion, this would be better...everyone would participate into the class.

Moreover, S22FL put forward two opinions about the application of questioning,

[The instructor] gave a follow-up test at the end of each lesson but these tests existed on paper only. If [the instructor] had asked questions in the tests by selecting a student to answer, we would have studied more. If we cannot give an answer to a question asked by an instructor, we feel embarrassed; thus, we would study hard...Besides, [the instructor] may select students randomly from the list and ask questions about topics, this would be better ...thereby we would listen to the lesson carefully.

### **Effectiveness of Lecturing**

Regarding lecturing, while S32FH and S23MH explained that they learned better from the instructor's lecturing rather than drama, S43FL and S25FH think lecturing was boring. On the other hand, S31ML, S33MH, S32FH, S35FM, S41MM, and S42FM suggested that a brief lecturing or general information about topics at the beginning of each session should take place for providing basic knowledge and better understanding.

### **Effectiveness of Student Presentations**

Concerning the presentations, S41MM, S42FM and S44FH talked about its benefits. They agreed that it was an initial step in the teaching profession since they experienced teaching and felt as if a teacher and overcame the nervousness of speaking in front of students. S43FL added that due to presentations, she learned how to speak and stand in front of people. Nevertheless, four senior students explained that they did not pay attention to the presenters, got bored; and thus, were not being able to learn topics presented by a student:

I saw some of our friends in the class first time in the presentations. Thus, I watched them and only paid attention whether s/he was nervous or not...That is, I did not have any idea about what they were explaining (S42FM).

A presentation by a person is extremely useless. Because I just studied the topic that I would present, after that I never opened the book till the exam (S44FH).

I do not think that presentation of topics is helpful for the students other than the presenter. When a friend of mine presents a topic, nothing is left in my mind...Either we chat or laugh (S41MM).

In this respect, S23MH stressed that presenters learned their own topics better than the other topics so coming to class being prepared by all students should be ensured. For this reason, he proposed:

...the student who is going to present may not be informed beforehand. At that time, [the instructor] may select a student randomly...or [the instructor] may give the responsibility of the presentation to a group. After that group shows up and explains the topic, [the instructor] may ask questions to the listeners. If this occurs, our attention to the topics increases in order to learn and answer to the asked questions. For this reason, this way would be better (S23MH).

Moreover, S22FL recommended these types of presentations in addition to drama and a brief lecturing by the instructor. She thinks that in this way instruction would be more student-centered and provide more retention of knowledge not only for the presenters but also for the others.

### **Effectiveness of Follow-up Tests**

Regarding the follow-up tests given each week, the students reflected that they were very beneficial in terms of better understanding, evaluating themselves, listening to the lesson, attending the course, providing a feedback about their understanding, and preparing for the midterm and final exams.

I have solved a follow-up test at the end of each lesson for the first time. This was happening the first time. I have never seen such a thing in the other courses. I think, it contributed to our self-evaluation. I think, it was very useful (S25FH).

...solving the test at the end of lesson...for this reason, we could reinforce the lesson. ...since similar questions in the test, sometimes the same ones, were asked in the exam, it was very helpful for the exams, too (S22FL).

The follow-up tests are very good reinforcers; that is, feedback...where do the students have mistakes?...It reinforces the topic very well. In this respect, I find it suitable. (S32FH)

I could see how competent I am in these topics (S33MH).

...we know that we will encounter the test at the end of topic...as well as basic information, there are theoretical information that we cannot solve and since we can solve [these kind of questions] only by listening to [the instructor], we were in need of listening to [the instructor] (S35FM).

...a person may think that today I shall listen to the lesson so that I might be successful in the test (S41MM.)

Because of the abovementioned benefits, all of the students emphasized that follow-up tests should be involved in the course.

### **Suggestions for Teaching Methods**

The students suggested a variety of teaching methods for effective instruction. Regarding providing retention, S21FM and S25FH recommended discussion and case study. The junior students recommended simulation of theories, case study, discussion, group-work, and individual study. The senior students, additionally, suggested projects, educational games, assignments, and brainstorming.

S44FH proposed projects as a means of practicing what was learned and as a tool for retention. In order to involve students in their own learning, S42FM recommended assignments. For discussion, S41MM, S42FM, and S43FL said that it should be related to the application of theories in teaching life and include more intensive questioning. S35FM suggested group work or individual work for students who get low grades on exams. S32FH pointed out that they did not understand well how to apply theories in teaching life since it was not shown; thus she stated that simulation of these theories would display for them how to use these theories. S42FM remarked that if simulation had been used, they would have listened to the topics, attended class more, been able to put theories into practice and retain topics well.

The most frequently suggested method among the students was the use of case studies. S45MH indicated that there were not any cases related to theories in the class, whereas, if there were, students' motivation and participation would increase. In relation to case study, the junior students reflected the followings:

If [the instructor] had started the lesson by giving a case and then explained the topic, after that if she had got ideas of the students by giving another case and asked questions like what would you do in this case?, it would have been better (S36MM).

The cases related to the topics or real life incidences could have been brought... [The instructor may explain] ‘such problems are encountered in teaching life but these problems have been solved by what I have taught to you’...That is, we should understand that the theories can be applied in the real life...[The instructor] should give case studies by allowing time for students to think. That is, students should think about what the case is about, which theory it is related to and which point they are supposed to reach. [The instructor] should encourage students to think (S35FM).

S35FM underlined that the instructor should not give cases only as an example of corresponding topics but also she should force students to think about the cases and students should realize how to relate them to topics. S32FH emphasized that case studies should be colored with different stories and problems so that students would propose different solutions and reach different ideas.

### **Suggestions for Instructional Materials**

All groups indicated that there were no instructional materials other than the course book. Regarding the course book, all of the sophomore students found it boring, cold, too abstract, and noted that it included redundant details. The students in the three focus groups proposed that visual, audio, concrete, and real illustrations and materials such as pictures, films, video, and tape cassettes could be more helpful for attracting attention and active participation.

Videos or pictures attract students’ attention much more...For example, it might be a video of students in a school or of their development (S33MH).

If there were videos or movies, participation would have been much more. Also, they would have listened to [the lesson] carefully (S36MM).

The sophomore students suggested videos presenting students’ behaviours in a real class and a dialog between a child and her/his parent in order to understand how to put theory into practice and retain the given information.

For example, in moral development or psychosocial development theories, we learned about the development of adolescences...here, for example we could have listened to cassettes including dialogs between an adolescent and his/her parents or watched a short movie. In my opinion, if there might have been such materials, these would have been very effective and provided retention (S25FH).

The students (S21FM and S24MM) suggested that videos and cassettes can be paused at critical points and students can be asked to predict what would happen or to state what they would do in that case.

There should be short movies. For example, a movie should be watched in the classical conditioning. For a moment, the scene should be paused and questions like which principle of which theory appeared herein should be asked. For example, what would you do, if it were you? In my opinion this would be very beneficial. Both auditory and visual, [the information] would be retained permanently (S21FM).

Besides videos and pictures, bringing a child to the class, giving drama scripts to students and more supplementary books including more practical information and examples were the other suggestions.

[The instructor] could have brought a baby or skeleton [for physical development], and could have recorded [examples from real life] to the video and showed to the students (S46ML).

The results pointed out the lack of teaching-learning materials in the course and the students' desire to have rich material sources. Moreover, the qualitative data presented and quoted above are important evidences for the quality and nature of teaching materials that are generally ignored in the teaching learning processes (Weston & Cranton, 1986).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

We have undertaken this study in order to identify the opinions of the prospective teachers regarding the Development and Learning course so as to improve the course based on the expressed problems and deficiencies. We examined the results under ten themes each of which illuminated important points that can be considered in the modification of the course.

The study findings revealed that the students need to know how to transfer the given knowledge into real life and teaching profession to learn a topic better and to understand the importance of the topics for teaching life. In this respect, the transfer of the knowledge acquired in any Educational Psychology course into teaching life has been also raised as a problem encountered often in teacher education, in spite of being a fundamental principle/assumption of this course (Kiewra & Gubbels, 1997; Peterson et al., 1990). Kiewra and Gubbels (1997) assert that to know teaching skills is insufficient unless they are practiced, and suggest use-oriented knowledge as opposed to declarative knowledge. Regarding meaningful learning and application of knowledge and theories in educational psychology, Peterson et al. (1990) also emphasize the need for the teaching and learning process within the context of real-life teaching-learning problems. Therefore, an instructor should exhibit the contribution of each topic to teaching especially by illustrating their applications into teaching.

According to the responses, attention and interest to topics and activities were of importance for learning topics because students expressed that they retained knowledge about the topics that attracted their attention because of being interesting, different, and entertaining. Indeed, these two interwoven factors are counted among principles for teaching and learning. Even, as a second law of teaching, Gregory (2009) states that "A

learner one who attends with interest to the lesson given...Gain and keep the attention and interest of the pupils upon the lesson. Refuse to teach without attention.” (pp. 5-6). It is a matter of fact that learning cannot be ensured without attention (Bennion, 2008). In order to secure and hold attention, it is asserted that attention should accompany genuine interest. In other words, students’ attention should not be compelled by teachers, it should be attracted so as to create an eagerness to grasp knowledge and power and endurance to keep students on tasks (Bennion, 2008; Gregory, 2009). However, in this study, it was observed that there was a problem in attracting attention and this problem was the basic reason for not learning topics and the lack of participation in this course. According to the students, the topics covered in this course were too theoretical, abstract and verbal to arouse interest and attract attention. It was noticed that except for drama, the course was not presented in an interesting manner rather it was monotone, which is deemed the enemy of attention (Bennion, 2008).

As another instructional problem, the results uncovered that the students did not participate actively in the class because of being overloaded with abstract and theoretical knowledge, not understanding the relation of the topics to real life and the teaching profession, not finding the course attractive, and not being motivated. In an effective learning environment, classroom participation is important. For this reason, a teacher should be able to motivate students especially intrinsically, encourage interaction in the class and provide active engagement (Slavin, 2003). The findings illuminated that rather than being full of abstract knowledge far from practice, they need an attractive resource rich learning environment helping them to understand how to put the theories into practice-to relate to reality- and to appreciate the importance of the topics for teaching life. In this respect, Cruickshank, Bainer and Metcalf (1995) state that a variety of instructional alternatives would attract and hold students attention in the class, motivate them, increase their involvement and make them receptive to learning.

In this respect, among teaching methods that were already used in the course, questioning and drama were frequently mentioned as effective methods in learning. It was realized that questioning was especially a tool for attracting attention and providing participation but there was a need for more intensive questioning. Regarding drama, although a few prospective teachers objected to its effectiveness particularly in the case of being unsuccessful in adapting a topic to drama, mostly positive impacts of drama on learning, thinking skills and self-confidence were reported. There has been also much research supporting and explaining learning by drama in education (e.g., Andersen, 2002, 2004; Henry, 2000; McNaughton, 2004; Montgomerie & Ferguson, 1999; Morgan & Saxton, 1985). It is asserted that learning through drama whose roots are founded in cognitivism, intrinsic learning, aesthetic learning, and situated learning plays an essential role in understanding knowledge acquisition, placing learning in meaningful contexts, engaging in realistic problems, and developing thinking skills and metacognition (Andersen, 2002; Henry, 2000). As well as the prospective teachers’ expressions, this view also addresses that drama should be kept in the course, but its utilization and application should be carefully revised. Firstly, more guidance to students who perform drama should be given so as to provide accurate integration of theories into drama. Next, drama performing groups should aim not only to make the class laugh but also and mainly to present a real life case of theories properly. Because, the responses of some prospective teachers pointed out that they watched drama only for fun per se but did not

care about learning or understanding topics and this case was generally appeared when the drama performing groups only dealt with making their peers laugh and their drama was not related to the given theories. For these reasons, guidance for drama groups is of importance. Lastly, students' learning style differences should not be undervalued. Different reactions of a few prospective teachers toward drama in the study specified that drama might be a drawback for receptive or auditory students. Therefore, complementary activities appropriate to various learning styles should be presented to students.

Moreover, the students uttered that follow-up tests made them understand topics better, listen to the lessons, attend the course, evaluate themselves, provided feedback about their performance, and facilitated studying for the midterm and final exams. In this respect, the related studies demonstrate that frequent and on time feedback in learning environments where tests take place frequently provide students opportunities not only for practicing what they have learned but also for evaluating themselves and realizing and overcoming their deficiencies on time so that they feel more competent, self-confident, and motivated and they learn better and retain knowledge more permanently (Donovan & Radosevich, 1999; Huba & Freed, 2000; Myers & Myers, 2007). For this reason, it is advocated that such tests should take part in lessons as a learning and assessment tool (Gerdy, 2002; Huba & Freed, 2000).

Besides these existing teaching methods, the suggestions of the prospective teachers for additional teaching methods are of value not only to promote their learning but also to satisfy students' learning styles and to provide active participation. They wanted mostly active and student-centred learning methods like case studies, assignments, discussion, brainstorming, debates, simulation, group or individual projects and cooperative strategies. In fact, the importance of case studies in meaningful learning and teaching in teacher education and in transferring knowledge into the real educational life is emphasized by educational psychologists (Peterson et al., 1990). Although presentation of topics was not indicated as an effective method in learning, the sophomore students think that it is a beneficial tool for overcoming nervousness about teaching in front of students and for coming to class prepared. It should be noted that the use of these methods alone was not preferred by the students; they wanted these methods to be used to complement each other. Besides these student-centred methods, a brief lecturing by the instructor was also desired. They generally agreed that whatever method is used, there should be a brief lecturing by the instructor for the purpose of either introducing the topic or repeating and summing the topic up.

Regarding instructional materials, their inadequacy in the class was stressed. This result addressed that this course needs to be enriched with concrete materials (e.g., models), audio and visual materials (e.g., cassettes, video, projector, slide, transparency), supplementary books, and related documents. As pointed out by Weston and Cranton (1986), in this study it was seen that the quality/nature of teaching materials was ignored.

In the teacher education programs, in order to attain educational goals and intended objectives, the curriculum or courses should be developed or altered so as to meet the prospective teachers' needs and expectations expressed by them. These should be taken into consideration not only by the instructors, educators, or evaluators, but also by the policy makers or decision makers. In this sense, the qualitative approach to this evaluation study enlightened the problems and deficiencies in the Development and Learning course that entail its modification. The students' responses addressed the

essentiality of principles for teaching and learning that were ignored in this course but should be considered in the instruction of any course, such as providing an attractive learning environment with various teaching methods and materials for active participation and increasing motivation, presenting not only declarative knowledge but also use-oriented knowledge to put theories into practice, ensuring the application of theories into real life, and taking students' learning styles into account. It was noted that the flow of the course needs to attract and keep attention of the students by enriching the course with interesting activities, cases, and tasks so that active engagement of the students would be assured. The results drew attention to the importance of using practice-oriented instruction in the pedagogical courses, especially in such a course covering basic theories rather than practice because it was noticed that there was a need for understanding the relevance of the topics to the teaching profession and life rather than understanding the content itself. Thus, the course should be designed so as to provide practices for putting development and learning theories into real and teaching life. In this context, drama can be used provided that appropriate integration of theories to the roles was ensured. However, the results underlined the fact that there is not any one instructional method adequate and responsive to students' expectations and needs alone. Therefore, the course should be enriched with a variety of methods and materials matching up with students' learning styles and strategies. In this respect, the suggested methods such as case studies, simulation, discussion, and brainstorming can be used interchangeably. According to the responses, follow-up tests and the questioning technique can be kept in the course because of their positive impact on learning, retention, feedback, self-evaluation, participation, and attention. The course also was in need of rich teaching-learning materials especially concrete and visual materials that would draw students' attention. These modifications would lead to increased motivation, as well.

Even though the findings cannot be generalized because the study was conducted with 18 participants, the results may contribute to the instructors or educators who would like to improve the analogous teacher education courses. Yet, the reason for adopting interviews into the study was to achieve in-depth understanding of the study context and in this respect, the prospective teachers' expressions, comments, and feelings uncovered valuable information that cannot be gathered by any quantitative instrument. Consequently, this study brought up the importance and necessity of the qualitative inquiry in evaluating any educational setting. Thus, qualitative inquiry should be integrated into any evaluation study without ignoring the essentiality of the conventional inquiries based on quantitative methods. In this respect, this study showed that the focus group interview is an essential means to elicit deep information and highlighted that students are valuable inputs offering constructive reflections, opinions, and suggestions for improving a course. However, this study was limited to only a qualitative data collection method. In terms of triangulation, the use of different data sources and collection methods in future research would provide more trustworthy results. This study was context-bounded; that is, a course in a vocational teacher education program was evaluated. However, this course or similar ones have been taught in other teacher education faculties in Turkey and in the world. Therefore, conducting comparative studies for this course might be more illuminative in terms of determining common patterns and impact of cultural and personal factors and this might lead educators to

design this course to be more responsive to students' needs. In this context, responsiveness of an evaluation study to the needs of all parties would be ensured if the study takes perceptions, opinions, and suggestions of other stakeholders such as faculty, teachers, and principles into account. This issue might be handled in a further study.

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## Appendix A

### Focus Group Interview Questions

*Hello, I am here to talk to you about your opinions about the Development and Learning course. We are carrying out an evaluation study for this course and interviewing with a group of students from sophomore, junior, and senior levels in order to reveal your opinions regarding the instruction of this course and to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the course. We hope that your responses will help us to improve this course so as to be more responsive to the students' needs, expectations, and suggestions. Eventually, we aim to revise this course to raise more qualified teacher candidates and thereby, we hope that this study will also contribute to the development of other teacher education courses in the Faculty. Therefore, your responses are of value not only for this study but also and more importantly for the faculty and teacher candidates in the future. These are the reasons why I need to know what your personal reflections about this course. Please feel free and comfortable to express your opinions and feelings.*

*Before starting, I would like to make some points clear:*

- *This interview will take almost 60-70 minutes.*
- *Everything that you say to me remains confidential. We do not pass on anything people tell us and we do not use the names of the individuals in anything we write.*
- *During interview, you are free to ask questions or terminate it.*
- *I would like to get your approval to tape our conversation. By this way, I will both be able to manage our time more successfully and I will be able to note down your answers in detail after the interview. Be sure that you can get the tape cassette and notes back if you feel uncomfortable. Is it ok for you?*
- *Thanks in advance for your participation and contributions*

1. Please give me some information about your background.
  - 1a. Which high school did you graduate?
  - 1b. Why did you prefer this faculty?
2. When you took this course, what were your expectations?
  - 2a. To what extent do you think that your expectations were met or not met?
  - 2b. What might be the reasons?
3. Did this course contribute to you to be a teacher? If yes, how? If no, why?
4. Were there any topic in the course that you feel yourself competent or incompetent
  - 4a. What were or could be the reasons for feeling competent in the topics you felt competent?
  - 4b. What were or could be the reasons for feeling incompetent in the topics you felt incompetent?
5. During the lessons, to what extent you were participating into the lessons? How?
 

Cue: in in-class activities, asking and answering questions?
6. What do you think about the instructional sources and materials used in the course?
  - 6a. To what extent were they beneficial? Did they facilitate understanding of topics?
  - 6c. To what extent were they practical and usable?
7. What else could have been used in the course as instructional materials?
8. What do you think about the instructional methods, techniques, or activities used in the course?
  - 8a. To what extent were they beneficial? Why?
  - 8b. Did they facilitate understanding of topics? How?
9. If you were given a chance to take this course again or to go back that year you took this course, how would you prefer this course to be taught?
 

Alternative questions: How would you like this course to be taught during a lesson hour?

Clue: Which instructional methods, techniques, or strategies would be better to have been used in this course?

10. Do you have any recommendations for the improvement of the Development and Learning course?

## Appendix B

### Themes and Codes

Relevance to Real Life and Teaching Profession	1	Not being motivated to participate	3.3.4
Effectiveness in understanding topics	1.1	Effectiveness of drama	4
Effectiveness in retention knowledge	1.2	Enjoyable learning environment	4.1
Effectiveness in feeling competent	1.3	Drawing attention	4.1.1
Effectiveness in putting theory into practice	1.4	Having fun	4.1.2
Effectiveness in attracting attention	1.5	Impact on learning	4.2
Effectiveness in making students to consider topics important	1.6	Beneficial for learning and retention	4.2.1
Attention	2	Depending on success of the presenters in integrating topics into drama	4.2.2
Content-related factors affecting attention	2.1	Effective when instructor explained and complemented missing points	4.2.3
Being attractive	2.1.1	Impact on thinking skills	4.3
Being interesting	2.1.2	Beneficial for creative thinking	4.3.1
Being striking	2.1.3	In associating topics to real life	4.3.2
Being entertaining	2.1.4	In relating drama to the presented topics	4.3.3
Being too abstract	2.1.5	For brainstorming	4.3.4
Being too verbal	2.1.6	Impact on the students' personality	4.4
Being too theoretical	2.1.7	Overcoming nervousness of speaking in front of people	4.4.1
Impact on studying	2.2	Gaining self-confidence	4.4.2
Impact on learning	2.3	Gaining self-courage	4.4.3
Impact on retention	2.4	Effectiveness of questioning technique	5
Participation	3	Made students to listen carefully	5.1
The way of participation	3.1	Made them pay more attention	5.2
Answering questions	3.1.1	Provided better understanding	5.3
Doing presentation	3.1.2	Provided more participation	5.4
Participating in the follow-up tests	3.1.3	Suggestions for questioning	5.5
Reasons for participating	3.2	Using intensively at the end of each session	5.5.1
Course requirements	3.2.1	Using together with brainstorming	5.5.2
Instructor's call on a student to answer	3.2.2	Asking questions in the follow-up tests to students	5.5.3
Interesting course topic	3.3.3	Effectiveness of lecturing	6
Reasons for not participating	3.3	Better than drama	6.1
Not having participatory nature (shyness, unwillingness, apathy)	3.3.1	Boring	6.2
Lack of drawing attention	3.3.2	Better at the beginning of each lesson	6.3
Unwillingness	3.3.3	Effectiveness of student presentation	7
		Provide an initial step in teaching profession	7.1
		Effective in overcoming nervousness of speaking in front of people	7.2
		Effective in learning how to speak and stand in front of people	7.3
		Not paying attention to the presenters	7.4
		Getting bored	7.5
		Not being able to learn topics presented by sts.	7.6
		Effective only for presenters in learning their own topic	7.7.

### Themes and Codes (Continue)

Effectiveness of follow-up tests	8	Reasons	9.9
Beneficial for better	8.1	In order to put theories into practice	9.9.1

understanding		In order to understand how to relate	9.9.2
Beneficial for evaluating themselves	8.2	theories to real and teaching life	9.9.3
Beneficial for listening to the lesson	8.3	In order to increase motivation	9.9.4
Beneficial for attending the course,	8.4	In order to increase participation	9.9.5
Beneficial for providing a feedback to students	8.5	In order to listen to the topics carefully	9.9.6
Beneficial for preparing for the exams	8.6	In order to attend class more	9.9.7
Suggestions for teaching methods	9	In order to retain topics well	9.9.8
Discussion and questioning	9.1	In order for low-achiever students	9.9.9
Case study	9.2	In order to study more conscientiously	9.9.10
Simulation	9.3	Suggestions for instructional materials	10
Group or individual work	9.4	Visual/Audio/Audio-visual materials	10.1
Projects	9.5	Pictures	10.2
Educational games	9.6	Films/Video	10.3
Assignment	9.7	Tape cassettes	10.4
Brainstorming	9.8	Concrete materials	10.5
		Models	10.6
		Drama scripts	10.7
		Supplementary books	10.8
		Reasons	10.9
		In order to attract attention	10.9.1
		In order to ensure active participation	10.9.2
		In order to understand how to put theory into practice	10.9.3
		In order to retain knowledge	10.9.4

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