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Impact Evaluation of the Multi-Grade Classroom Readiness Program for Prospective Teachers: The First Step to Villages Schools (FSVS) Program

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Abstract

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the online version of the First Step to Village Schools (FSVS) Program in Turkey, which seeks to fill the knowledge and practice gap of prospective teachers, via mixed-methods research. Participants were volunteer university students from various faculties of education. In the quantitative part of the study, a single group pre-test/post-test design was used. Researchers developed the Rural School Teaching and Communication scale (KOIO), the Professional Knowledge and Skills scale (MBBO) and the Personal-Interpersonal Skills scale (KSBO). The SPSS program was used to analyze the quantitative data. During the qualitative data collection, prospective teachers were asked 3 open-ended questions as part of the post-test and a phenomenological design was used. The inductive content analysis technique was used for the analysis of the qualitative data. The results

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show that the FSVS program contributed to teacher candidates' development in professional knowledge and skills and individual-social skills such as teaching and communication in rural areas. The experience of prospective teachers achieved during the FSVS program is interpreted as a transition from a lack of readiness to a state of readiness to teach in a village.

Keywords: *Covid-19 pandemic; online training; The First Step to Villages Program; Prospective Teachers; Rural Education*

Introduction

In Turkey, as in many other parts of the world, finding teachers for multi-grade classrooms in rural areas and retaining them at their posts in the long-term is a difficult challenge confronting policymakers and institutions that train teachers. (Jenkins, Reitano & Taylor, 2011; Ministry of National Education [MoNE] 2007; Sağ, 2009; Savaş & Sezer, 2009; Şahin, 2003). Many of the teachers assigned to rural regions are quite young and lack professional experience working in these regions. Thus, they struggle with overcoming the challenges that they face. Many prospective teachers and teachers are raised in urban centers, and this presents an additional challenge for them geographically, socially, economically, and culturally in terms of adaptation (Sharplin, 2002). Many prospective teachers do not volunteer to work in rural regions, but instead are required due to Turkish state appointment policies. Teachers, in the first years of their duty, must work for 3 or 4 years in mandatory service regions (http://personel.meb.gov.tr/upload/turkiye_haritasi_hizmet_bolgeleri.pdf). Mandatory service regions for classroom teachers are primarily found in rural areas, predominantly in eastern Turkey. Teachers who complete their mandatory service of three or four years may be assigned to other regions. This is an additional issue that contributes to high teacher turnover rates.

Prospective (Pre-service) teacher training programs do not differ based on the assignment location, and therefore cannot address the unique challenges that come with working in a rural area (Eret, 2013; Jenkins, Reitano & Taylor, 2011; Sharplin, 2002; Gibson, 1994). In her doctoral dissertation, Eret (2013) establishes that prospective (preparatory) teacher training programs do not sufficiently prepare teachers to work in rural areas. The previously required eighth-semester course "Teaching in Multi-grade Classrooms" was taken off the prospective teacher-training curriculum in 2018. This poses yet another difficulty. In the new program, the elective "Alternative Teaching Applications in Elementary Schools" is now being offered instead, which only includes a unit on multi-grade classrooms (Council of Higher Education, 2018). This course takes one semester to complete. In the course, only theoretical knowledge is imparted and evaluated. The course content includes bussed education and boarding education besides the multi-grade classroom teaching.

Moreover, research focused on Turkey (Aksoy 2008a; 2008b; Sag, Savaş & Sezer 2009; Sağ & Sezer 2012; Şahin 2003) shows that teachers (teachers in training or prospective teachers) either do not have any coursework on multi-grade classrooms or they do not receive sufficient training for it. The lack of sufficient training in teaching methods geared toward students in rural areas causes prospective teachers to depend on hearsay (Sharplin, 2002). The shared conclusion of the researchers on this topic is that prospective teacher training programs do not help prospective teachers adequately gain facilitation skills such as familiarization with teaching methods, application, analysis of applications, forming professional and social connections with coworkers, geographical, social and economic familiarization, inspection, and interaction with the rural area (Aksoy, 2008a, 2008b; Barley, 2009; Boylan, et. al., 1993; Jenkins & Cornish 2015; Sağ, 2009; Sharplin, 2002).

During the past 30 years, there has been an increase in both prospective and in-service teacher training programs that seek to find long-term teachers in rural regions in countries such as Australia, the United States of America, and Canada. One quality of these programs that stands out in the development of these programs is the involvement of both the regional and national authorities that are in charge of teacher assignments (Barley, 2009; Green & Reid, 2004; Jenkins & Cornish, 2015; Yarrow et. al., 1999). According to these studies, such programs do not only aim to develop prospective teacher trainings, but they also seek to develop a holistic relationship between schools and the socio-economic and cultural development of rural areas, stressing the role of the teacher in this process. The role of the teacher is understood as a crucial member of the community tasked with rearing the individuals who will be a part of the social, economic and cultural development of the region (Green & Reid, 2004; Barley, 2009; Jenkins, Reitano & Taylor, 2011). In this formulation, which is similar to the founding mission of the former Village Institutes in Turkey (Aysal, 2005), the role of the teacher is central and is defined as being a leader who guides their community towards socio-economic progress by raising and educating the people who will be needed for this progress (Barley, 2009; Green & Reid, 2004; Gruenewald, 2003; Jenkins & Cornish, 2015; Jenkins, Reitano & Taylor, 2011; Sharplin, 2002). Evaluations conducted following the above described in-service and prospective teacher programs reveal hopeful findings such as an increase in the number of teachers who are

interested in assignments to rural schools, as well as an increase in the number of teachers interested in long-term positions at these schools, and a higher appreciation for the positive feelings fostered between rural communities and teachers (Jenkins & Cornish, 2015).

Literature Review

Nearly all research on multi-grade classrooms in Turkey focuses on the identification of problems through an analysis of the current conditions. Categorized by topic focus, these studies a) look at the issues of rural schools, specifically of schools with multi-grade classrooms (Aksoy, 2008a; 2008b; Dursun, 2006; Gözler & Çelik, 2013; Kaya & Taşdemirci, 2005; Külekçi, 2013; Özben, 2000; Sağ, Savaş & Sezer, 2009); b) investigate the interaction between rural school teachers and local culture (Meydan & Yıldız, 2015); c) evaluate the content of the multi-grade classroom related educational content that prospective teachers are exposed to (Sağ, 2009; Tolu, Albayrak, Türkmen & Duysak, 2021); d) study the issues faced by multi-grade classroom students who attend higher education (Gönül & Arslan, 2018); e) review and analyze the multi-grade classroom evaluations completed by prospective elementary school teachers and current elementary school teachers (Çalışoğlu & Tanışır, 2017; Keser, Özmantar & Civelek, 2017; Şahin, 2003); f) evaluate the effectiveness of different teaching models used in multi-grade classrooms (Aslan & Kazu, 2015). In yet another study, Keser, Özmantar and Civelek (2017) have provided recommendations to help improve prospective teacher training programs by preparing teachers for multi-grade classrooms. Keser et al. (2017) demonstrates that not much effort has been put into reviewing and revising the curriculums taught at faculties of education at Turkish universities. Similarly, little has been done to ensure that there is a move towards more hands-on, experiential learning experiences such as required internships in multi-grade classrooms.

A curriculum that allows prospective teachers to gain direct experience with the teaching approaches utilized in multi-grade classrooms and experience life in rural regions can positively impact the quality of prospective teacher training programs, moving the programs further towards exemplary models like Australia's. The first instance of

such a project in Turkey is the First Step to Villages Program, which is abbreviated as the "FSVS program."

The First Step to Villages Program (FSVS program) is a project that seeks to complete the knowledge and practice gap that is experienced by teachers who work in rural regions and in multi-grade classrooms. It was developed to be carried out face-to-face by the Rural Schools Transformation Network (KODA, abbreviated based on the Turkish initials). However, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the project has been moved online. Its aim is to help prospective teachers get ready professionally to teach in multi-grade classrooms. It also seeks to address some of the issues that have arisen during the pandemic. This study has been designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the online version of the FSVS program. This evaluation is done with the input of prospective teachers who participated in the project.

Before setting the FSVS program's goals, two approaches were chosen in order to address the needs of the program: democratic participation and a conjunctural approach. The first approach is significant as it brings together teachers who have first-hand experience of the issues with academics and experts who have experience in and have done research on multi-grade classrooms in a democratic manner. The second approach is important in understanding the needs of the teachers in order to have them remain in village schools for longer periods. Therefore, the program content is not limited to merely general professional development support, as the content is diversified to improve the adaptive capacity of the prospective teachers in terms of geography, socio-economics, and culture (Demirel, 2009). The program content has been developed to address topics such as teaching in a rural school, teaching in a multi-grade classroom, lesson planning and content development, and communication with students, parents, and villagers.

As the fall semester of the 2020-2021 education year was not conducted face-to-face due to Covid-19, FSVS program also switched to a fully online program. The entire program has been developed by KODA facilitators and the support team, which is made up of academics, trainers, and experts who are also teachers (Figure 02).

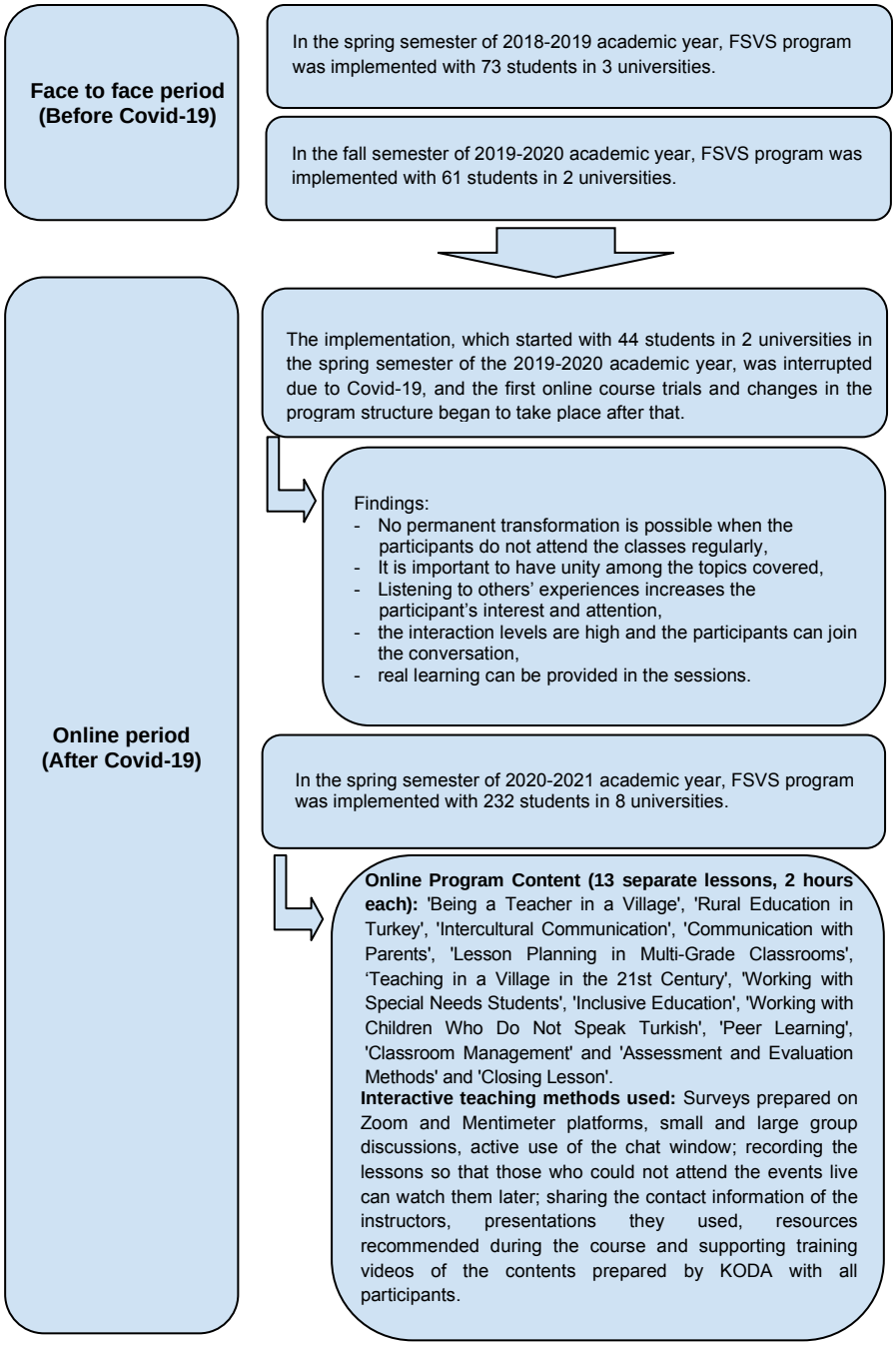

Figure 01: FSVS Program Content and Formation Process

In the previous FSVS program sessions, the teachers had the opportunity to gain experience through hands-on practice. In bringing the program online, this aspect of the program was replaced by experienced elementary school teachers sharing their experience, memories, and knowledge. Experts, academics, and teachers who were teaching at rural schools at that time also joined the classes as guest trainers. Since each class meeting had a different guest trainer or teacher, the students had the chance to learn from a wide variety of professionals.

The FSVS program aims to get prospective teachers to a) gain professional skills that will better equip them to teach in multi-grade classrooms, b) familiarize themselves with the various geographical, social, economic, and cultural aspects of the rural region they will be assigned to, and therefore develop new skills and perspectives, c) learn strategies that will allow them to cooperate with local communities in aiding the development of the village.

The FSVS program takes into account three dimensions in its organization: the teacher's ability to perform well in multi-grade classrooms; the teacher's ability to adapt well to the rural region geographically, socially, economically, and culturally; and finally, strengthening the connection between the previous two dimensions (Joseph, 2010). In the holistic approach, which looks at the connection between different parts as well as the connection between the parts and the whole, the context in which education takes place and the psychological, sociological, and physical well-being of the learners are all taken into account (Miller, 2007). This is why the program seeks to have active participation from prospective teachers. The aim of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the FSVS program, and it attempts to answer the following questions:

1) Is there a significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test scores of the prospective teachers who participated in the program in terms of a) Rural school teaching and communication scale, b) Professional knowledge and skills scale, and c) Personal-Social skills scale?
2) a) How do prospective teachers evaluate the FSVS program's implementation process and b) what are their recommendations for improving the FSVS program?

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach has been used in this study. Mixed methods research has both qualitative and quantitative dimensions, and to have a holistic understanding of the results it is necessary to bring together these

two dimensions (Creswell, 2019). The impact evaluation of the FSVS program was carried out in accordance with this mixed model methodology. Specifically, it is based on the embedded mixed design method. The quantitative data based on scales and the qualitative data based on interviews were collected and evaluated simultaneously as part of the data triangulation process. The quantitative part of the research uses the pre-posttest experimental design, whereas the qualitative part uses the empirical phenomenological approach of Moustakas (1994). This design stresses the return to experience in order to describe the essence of it, and it thus reaches extensive descriptions of the phenomena. The flow chart of the experimental design is presented below in Figure 1.

Participants. The participants are composed of volunteer university students from various faculties of education currently training to become elementary school teachers. Thus, the sampling was done using a convenience sampling technique (Patton, 2014). 232 participants took part in the experimental stage of the current study. 173 of those participants completed both pre and the post-tests. Answers from 3 participants are considered to be outliers and therefore are not included in the evaluation. Of the 170 participants, 23.5% attend Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University (MAKU; 4.1% attend Dicle University (DU); 11.2% attend Ege University (EU); 6.5% attend Kastamonu University (KU); 18.8% attend Mus Alparslan University (MAU); 11.8% attend Siirt University (SU); 14.7% attend Uludağ University (UU); and 9.4% attend Van Yüzüncü Yıl University (VYYU). A majority of the participants (88.82%) are in the 18-22 age range, while the rest are in the 23-30 range. A majority of them (81.2%) are female. Sophomore (2nd grade) students make up 30.6% of all participants, junior (3rd grade) students make up 53.5%, and senior year (4th grade) students make up 15.9%. Most of the prospective teachers (67.6%) joined the research during their "Alternative Teaching Applications in Elementary Schools" class. While 72.9% of the prospective teachers have never been educated in a rural school, 57.1% of them stated that they have visited a rural school in the past.

Twenty-four prospective teachers were asked to share their thoughts regarding the evaluation of the study. Maximum variation sampling was used to choose these 24 prospective teachers. There are 3 or 4 prospective teachers from each university that took part in this part of the research. Personal data of the prospective teachers is presented in parentheses alongside the qualitative findings within the scope of rich, thick descriptions.

In all aspects of this study, the Turkey "Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive" was followed (https://www.yok.gov.tr/Sayfalar/Kurumsal/mevzuat/bilimsel-arastirma-ve-etik-yonetmeligi.aspx). Scientific, ethical, and citation norms were respected when reporting the findings. The collected data was not altered in any way. Participants who completed informed consent forms before the process, were informed about the research procedures and assured that they were voluntarily participating in the study.

Data collection tools. During the online version of the FSVS program, there were two separate observation and evaluation processes. The first entailed observing the changes in students before and after the program, while the second required collecting student feedback on each class in order to better evaluate the program in terms of content, planning, and implementation. Surveys were completed at the beginning and at the end of the program in order to collect data to determine whether the program achieved its goals.

The pre-test and post-test question forms had open-ended and 5-point Likert scale types of questions. The questions that had been prepared in the previous years using three expert opinions and the PhD thesis entitled "*The relationship between 21st century learner skills use and 21st century teacher skills use*" (Orhan Göksun, 2016) were further diversified by the addition of new content to the program. These new additions were developed with the feedback and suggestions of academics and experts. Six people in total, two previous students who participated in the program, two KODA team members, and two academics were asked to read the additional questions and give feedback on their clarity and precision. The language used was edited based on this feedback. After the edits, the questions were checked again to ensure clarity and an ease of understanding.

In order to collect quantitative data, three scales were developed by the researchers: The Rural School Teaching and Communication Scale (RSTCS), the Professional Knowledge and Skills Scale (PKSS), and the Personal-Social Skills Scale (SPSS). During the development process of the scales, the drafts prepared contained 18 items for RSTCS, 33 items for PKSS, and 26 items for SPSS. The Davis (1992) technique was used to ensure content validity, and the drafts were presented to experts. The experts marked each item as "highly relevant," "quite relevant," "somewhat relevant," or "not relevant," based on how connected the items are to the constructs they are meant to measure. As a result, two items were taken off RSTCS, four items were taken off PKSS, and six items were taken off SPSS based on the expert feedback on items in which at least 20% of the experts marked it as "somewhat relevant" or "not relevant."

In order to ensure the construct validity of the data collection tools, 232 prospective teachers' data was collected and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed. All multidimensional structures used in the EFA were shown to involve a high number of cross-loading items and most of the items were found to have a factor load of 0.30 or higher under a single factor (Akbulut, 2010). Therefore, single dimensional structures were chosen for RSTCS, PKSS, and SPSS in EFA. No items were taken off due to the factor load after EFA. However, some items with a common factor variance under 0.20 were ultimately removed from the scales (Büyüköztürk, 2012). Thus, in the final versions, RSTCS has 16 items, PKSS 24, and SPSS 19. The Bartlett test results were also significant for completing the final versions of all scales. ($p<0.001$) Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values were 0.85 for RSTCS, 0.94 for PKSS, and 0.93 for SPSS. These values show that the values acquired for EFA are acceptable and that the number of participants is sufficient (Seçer, 2013). Common factor variances were a minimum of 0.237 for RSTCS, 0.419 for PKSS, and 0.239 for SPSS. These values are sufficient for the creation of a scale to be used in the social sciences (Şencan, 2005). The factor loads of items ranged between 0.487 and 0.748 for RSTCS, 0.419 and 0.619 for PKSS, and 0.489 and 0.757 for SPSS. These values are also appropriate for social science research. With its single factor structure, RSTCS accounts for 37.20% of the total variance, PKSS accounts for 50.67%, and SPSS 43.80%. Because the values are greater than 30%, they are determined to be sufficient for single factor structures (Büyüköztürk, 2012).

To ensure the reliability of the measurements of the scales, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used. Table 1 shows the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the measurements:

Table 01
Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients of the Measurements

Scales	Pre-test results	Post-test results
RSTCS	0.88	0.90
PKSS	0.96	0.95
SPSS	0.91	0.90

According to Table 1, all of the Cronbach's alpha coefficients regarding pre-tests and post-tests measurements are above the .70. The alpha coefficients of the pre-tests were 0.88, 0.96, 0.91 for RSTCS, PKSS, and SPSS respectively. The post-test alpha coefficients were 0.90, 0.95, and 0.90 for RSTCS, PKSS, and SPSS respectively. These coefficients support the conclusion that the measurements done with these scales are reliable (Sipahi, Yurtkoru & Çinko, 2010).

The teacher candidates were asked three open-ended questions for the collection of qualitative data. These questions were prepared based on the reliability of the previous program evaluations and the feedback received then. The number of questions was lowered, and the questions were simplified. The aim of this was to allow the participants to express their evaluations more freely.

Data collection and implementation process. Data were collected in two rounds. Pre-test data was collected before the first class between the dates of 12.10.2020 - 15.10.2020 via an online question form. The post-test data was collected between the dates of 10.01.2021 - 15.01.2021, also via an online question form.

Analysis of quantitative data. In order to choose what tests would be used for the analysis of the data gathered from the RSTCS, PKSS, and SPSS, the normality of the distribution of the scores was checked. For the data of 173 participants, the coefficient of skewness was between +1 and -1 for all pre-tests and post-tests except for the SPSS post-test. SPSS post-test's coefficient of skewness was -1.222. The outliers were investigated by box-plot analysis, and data gathered from three of the participants were excluded. Thus, the coefficient of skewness became between +1 and -1 for all pre-tests and post-tests including the SPSS post-test. This coefficient range signals a normal distribution (Büyüköztürk 2012). Pre-test and post-test data gathered from the RSTCS, PKSS, and SPSS scales were matched by participants and a parametric paired samples t-test was conducted to analyze the data. Cohen's d was measured to determine the effect size of FSVS program on the dependent variables. The effect sizes are taken as: "0.2 = small, 0.5 = medium, 0.8 = large" (Pallant, 2007)

Analysis of qualitative data. Thematic analysis was used for the analysis of qualitative data. Specifically, Kuckartz's (2014) seven phases of thematic analysis were followed. 20% of the data set was randomly selected and coded by researchers. The first coding process was completed and then compiled by a researcher. Then, the codes were further analyzed in terms of their similarities and differences, thus creating a code book. (For example, an expression of panic was categorized as a concern; increased familiarity with multi-grade classrooms was categorized as

professional awareness.) Then all the coding was completed by researchers following the guidelines of the codebook. During the second cycle, themes and categories were formed and the coding process was completed. Three main themes appeared after coding: pre-FSVS program, during FSVS program, and suggestions for post-FSVS program. For each theme, categories and codes were created. A third expert was consulted in the creation of categories and codes. Before this consultation, there were no categories under the themes "pre-FSVS program" and "suggestions". After this consultation, the categories "knowledge," "skills," emotions," "attitude," "psychological qualities," and "experience" were added under "pre-FSVS program".

Reliability and consistency. In order to ensure the reliability and consistency of the analysis of qualitative data, two researchers did the coding. The participant data is presented in this research to ensure external validity. There was appropriate and sufficient participation in the data collection process. After 25 participants, it was observed that the data was repeated. This phase of data collection ended after 25 participants as data saturation has been reached. After all the coding was completed, a third expert reviewed all the themes and categories. The findings, comments and results of the two researchers were cross-checked to determine whether the findings, comments and results of the two researchers were supported by the data. The participants' names were changed into code names, (such as Hatice, Pervin, etc.) and their real names were not used. In the decision-making process involving the codes and themes, disagreements were addressed and final decisions were made with a consensus. Through this process, the data was reviewed three times. All identified themes and codes include direct quotations from participants.

Limitations. The research is limited to 170 prospective teachers studying in eight different universities in Turkey. The program and activities were limited to the online platform. The research was carried out through online education applications. Not every participant was able to follow the online program and processes under equal conditions, which is considered an additional limitation, as well.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative findings on the FSVS program. In order to understand whether there is a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the prospective teachers who participated in the FSVS program, paired sample t-tests were conducted. Findings from these tests are shown in Table 2.

Table 02
Paired Samples t-Test Results of the Pre-Test/Post-Test Scores

Scale	Test	N	x̄	Ss	sd	t	p	Cohen's d
Teaching and Communication in the Village	Pre-Test	170	53.42	9.87	169	-21.49	0.000	1.649
	Post-Test	170	69.28	7.71				
Professional Knowledge and Skills	Pre-Test	170	74.46	18.46	169	-20.140	0.000	1.545
	Post-Test	170	102.47	12.59				
Personal-Social Skills	Pre-Test	170	79.06	9.51	169	-11.290	0.000	0.866
	Post-Test	170	85.74	7.89				

Table 2 shows that the post-test scores of the prospective teachers who participated in FSVS program were higher than the pre-test scores (respectively $\bar{x}$=69.28; $\bar{x}$= 102.47; $\bar{x}$= 85.74) in a statistically significant way ($p<0.001$). Therefore, it can be concluded that the FSVS program contributes to teacher candidates' development in terms of teaching and communication in the village, professional knowledge and skills, and personal-social skills. Cohen's d values (1,649; 1,545; 0.866, respectively) show that the FSVS program has large effects on all these areas.

Qualitative findings regarding the FSVS program. In this section, the experiences of the candidates both before and during the FSVS program are defined.

Pre-FSVS program. According to the findings, the FSVS program participants talked about their knowledge, skills, emotions, attitudes, psychological qualities, and experiences of multi-grade classes before the program.

Knowledge. The prospective teachers' knowledge of these issues was found to be significantly deficient before the start of the program. Some participants stated that they were familiar with multi-grade classrooms before participating in the FSVS program. Kader (DU, 20 years old, female, sophomore student, no teaching experience/observation, had

studied in a village, had visited village schools) said, *"I didn't know much about this before. I never knew what to do in such a classroom, or how to run it."* She explained that there was a lack of awareness and knowledge about multi-grade classrooms, which caused her to experience uncertainty. Fatih (EU, 20 years old, male, junior student, has teaching experience/ observation, had studied in a village, had visited village schools) said the following before FSVS program: "Since I was born in a village, concepts such as multi-grade classrooms and village schools are not foreign to me." He stated that he participated in FSVS program with some knowledge of these concepts.

Skills. Some participants mentioned that they had communication deficiencies before the FSVS program. Orhan (EU, 21 years old, male, junior student, has teaching experience/observation, did not receive education in a village, visited village schools) said, *"To be honest, when I first came to the university, I could not speak in public. I didn't really want to speak. I tried to overcome this by practicing public speaking in various communities/non-governmental organizations, and I am still trying. Now, speaking in front of small groups and large groups, I think I can say that I have overcome my phobia."* He has significantly improved his communication skills.

Emotions. FSVS program participants experienced emotions like anxiety, uncertainty, and fear related to multi-grade classrooms before the program. Azize said, (UU, 20 years old, female, junior student, no teaching experience/observation, not educated in the village, did not visit any village schools) expressed her concern as following: *"Before participating in this class, I had concerns about communication with students, classroom management, teaching in multi-grade classrooms, and planning and carrying out lessons."*

Attitude. Prospective teachers' attitudes towards village schools/ multi-grade classrooms before the FSVS program were largely shaped by prejudice. Before the FSVS program, no one except for one student expressed a positive attitude towards multi-grade classrooms. Işık (EU, 21 years old, female, junior student, no teaching experience/observation, not educated in the village, had visited a village school) said the following: *"I always made the association that multi-grade classrooms were a sign of under-development."* Her statement demonstrates her prejudice and preconceived notions.

Psychological qualities. Participants who evaluated their psychological qualities before the FSVS program regarding village schools/multi-grade classrooms reported low to sufficient self-confidence. Seher expressed her low self-confidence accordingly: *"I wasn't very*

confident about multi-grade classes, I didn't have much knowledge, I felt it would be extremely difficult for me." Fatih, who had sufficient self-confidence regarding village schools/multi-grade classrooms, said: *"I never made a negative judgment because I thought I could succeed in this task."*

Experience. Only Tuğçe (MAKU, 20 years old, female, junior student, has teaching experience/observation, has not been educated in the village, has not visited a village school) brought up the subject of experience in terms of teaching at village schools/multi-grade classrooms. Her observation was that there was a lack of experience in this area. Tuğçe said the following: "*I learned many topics that I did not know before about village schools, I had no prior knowledge or experience.*"

FSVS program implementation process and outputs. FSVS program participants acquired various levels and forms of knowledge, skills, and perspectives during the program and experienced certain emotions, values, attitudes, and psychological qualities. These characteristics are defined under the previously presented sub-headings of information, skills, perspective, emotions, values, attitudes, and psychological qualities and experiences as phenomenology.

Knowledge. Prospective teachers participating in the weekly modules organized by FSVS program said that they acquired new knowledge of subjects such as village schools/multi-grade classrooms, the teaching profession, various methods and techniques that can be used in multi-grade classrooms, peer learning, inclusive education, communication with parents, teacher-student relationships, school-community cooperation, lesson planning, and basic concepts. Şenay (SU, 23 years old, female, junior student, no teaching experience/observation, did not receive education in the village, has not visited a village school), shared her experience as follows *"I learned what I can improve in village schools. I learned how to teach in multi-grade classrooms,"* showing that she thinks she improved herself in these regards. Şükran (UU, 21 years old, female, junior student, no teaching experience/observation, did not receive education in the village, did not visit a village school) summarized what she learned about school-community cooperation in the following way: *"I learned that education is not only student-based, but rather it also concerns the whole village."*

Skills. FSVS program positively affected certain skills such as problem solving, communication, empathy, the organization of inclusive activities, creativity, plan/program preparation, and the self-evaluation skills of prospective teachers. Sıdıka (VYYU, 22 years old, female, senior student, has teaching experience/observation, educated in a village, has

visited a village school) talked about how she acquired problem solving skills in the following way: *"I found out that there are certain difficulties that I would not even have thought of, now I know how to overcome them!"*

Perspective. FSVS program participants learned about others' perspectives and developed multiple/different perspectives during the program. Nurcan (DU, 20 years old, female, sophomore student, no teaching experience/observation, did not receive education in the village, has not visited a village school) said: *"I benefited from hearing the experiences of different teachers. I embraced their experience. I will benefit from these experiences in my professional life."*

Emotions. While the FSVS program mostly caused its participants to feel positive emotions such as motivation, excitement, clarity, peace, hope, curiosity, happiness, and satisfaction, it also caused them to experience emotions that required in depth analysis such as fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. Serap (VYYU, 22 years old, female, senior student, has teaching experience/observation, did not receive education in a village, has not visited a village school), says that although she did not know much about rural school education before, she has become excited about it after FSVS program: *"I am excited to have students in multi-grade classrooms."* As opposed to Serap, Şermin (MAU, 20 years old, female, sophomore student, no teaching experience/observation, did not receive education in the village, did not visit a village school) shared her fear and anxiety. She said: *"I was nervous about teaching in a multi-grade classroom in a village school, now I am even more nervous. It will be difficult for me to teach multi-grade classes."* Here is how she expressed her fear: *"When I heard about the difficulties experienced by experienced teachers, I first started to be afraid about village schools and then I started to take advantage of these experiences I got to hear.*" Veysel (MAU, 21 years old, male, sophomore student, no teaching experience/observation, not educated in the village, has visited a village school) said: *"I think I need to do some more research on this subject. I don't think I have a complete grasp of it. However, I now have more after the FSVS program."* These comments suggest that he was experiencing uncertainty at the end of the project. Although emotions such as fear and uncertainty are considered negative emotions when evaluated superficially, Şermin and Veysel's explanations demonstrate how these emotions can actually motivate educators to benefit from others' experiences or do additional research on specific topics.

Values. The values that FSVS program sought to instill in prospective teachers were patience, respect, responsibility, and tolerance. Isik said that she learned to approach cultural differences with respect and adopt an

inclusive, non-exclusive attitude. *"I learned that I should respect the language of the region I go to, and that I should never ban their language from being spoken even during class."*

Attitudes. It has been understood that the FSVS program positively affects the attitudes of teacher candidates in many areas and subjects. These subjects can be specified as the profession of teaching, village schools/multi-grade classrooms, planning, communication with students and parents, inclusive education, and intercultural communication. Duygu (DU, 23 years old, Female, 3rd grade, no teaching experience/observation, not educated in the village, never visited a village school) said *"I used to think that being a teacher in a village school was disadvantageous. I was afraid. I was thinking about how to handle it. Now I think that village schools have their advantages,"* and went on to explain her journey towards a more positive attitude in regard to teaching in village schools/ multi-grade classrooms that involved overcoming her prejudices, fears and anxieties. Işık said: *"I learned how to communicate with parents. I realized the importance of understanding them in order to become a member of the community,"* pointing to an ethno-relative attitude in the intercultural sensitivity dimension of intercultural communication.

Psychological qualities. The FSVS program contributed to both the self-confidence and self-awareness of prospective teachers. Şenay explains how her prejudice, anxiety, uncertainty, and insecurity turned into self-confidence with the FSVS program: *"I was prejudiced towards multi-grade classrooms before this class. I was wondering if I could do it or how it would even be. But after this class, my self-confidence increased. I think that I have reached the necessary level of competence to teach in multi-grade classrooms.*"

Suggestions of prospective teachers for the development of the FSVS program. Although the FSVS program had many positive outcomes, feedback from participants was gathered in order to assess and improve the program. Their suggestions were as follows: *help clear the bottleneck in small group discussions, organize the program schedule, offer resource suggestions about modules, enrich the content, make students more active, make the discussion questions more suitable for each level, shorten the introductory activities, have more small group discussions, avoid repetitive discussion questions, make observations in the village, have more experience-sharing activities, get together with children, control the speaking times of participant*s.

Soner (SU, 23 years old, male, junior student, no teaching experience/ observation, not educated in the village, visited a village school) suggested: *"Half an hour before the lesson, to avoid silence in the small*

group discussions, the questions to be discussed in that day's lesson should be shared with the students." Burcu (VYYU, 22 years old, female, senior student, no teaching experience/observation, did not receive education in the village, did not visit a village school) said, *"I stated this while filling out the form as well, more resources should have been shared with us."* She thinks it would be useful to offer further resource suggestions for each of the modules.

Phenomenological description. Textural, structural, and composite description processes were carried out in order to understand what FSVS program participants experienced within the scope of the program, how they experienced it, and what was at the core of their experiences.

Textural description: what did participants experience in the FSVS program? Before the FSVS program the participants mostly experienced a lack of knowledge, anxiety, prejudice, uncertainty, fear, insecurity, a lack of communication, and a lack of experience in regard to village schools and multi-grade classrooms. During the FSVS program, they experienced motivation, excitement, clarity, peace, hope, anxiety, curiosity, happiness, and satisfaction with the program. Even though no values were found regarding village schools/multi-grade classes in FSVS program participants before the program, the values of patience, love, responsibility, and tolerance became stronger through the FSVS program. The self-confidence and self-awareness of prospective teachers increased. Participants developed a positive attitude towards the profession of teaching, village schools/multi-grade classes, planning, communication with students and parents, inclusive education, and intercultural communication. Some difficulties in small group discussions were experienced during the program, because daily/weekly personal/corporate programs made it difficult to participate in FSVS program, and some participants could not participate in the discussions sufficiently.

Structural description: how did participants experience the FSVS program? FSVS program participants experienced the emotions, values, attitudes, and psychological qualities they acquired with the program, thanks to the knowledge, skills, and perspectives they gained and developed during this program. This knowledge includes *village schools/multi-grade classrooms, the profession of teaching, various methods and techniques, peer teaching, inclusive education, communication skills with parents, teacher-student relationship building, school-community cooperation, lesson planning, and basic concepts.* The skills that provide the aforementioned experiences to the participants are *problem-solving, communication, empathy, organizing inclusive*

activities, creativity, preparing a plan/curriculum, and the skill of self-evaluation. The participants' acquisition of the perspectives of the educators and the fact that they were able to experience multiple/different perspectives during the program also guided their experiences. During the program, certain experiences sometimes triggered others. Some participants experienced feelings of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. However, these feelings also contributed to the personal growth of prospective teachers as they learned to benefit from the perspectives of educators, which led to more positive outcomes such as increased motivation. The bottlenecks in the small group discussions during the program were due to the lack of readiness of the participants regarding certain topics, as well as the poor management of the group discussions, which led to bouts of silence in the discussion.

Composite description: what is the essence of participants' FSVS program experiences? Considering the periods before, during, and after FSVS program, the FSVS program experiences of prospective teachers are interpreted as a transition from a lack of readiness to a state of readiness to teach in a village.

Discussion

According to the results of this research, some prospective teachers stated that even before the FSVS program they had the knowledge, interest, and self-confidence to teach in multi-grade classrooms. However, most prospective teachers stated that their views on this subject were actually shaped by a lack of knowledge, a lack of communication skills, anxiety, uncertainty, fear, prejudice, low self-confidence and a lack of experience before the FSVS program. In Atalay and Yener's (2019) study, prospective teachers also mentioned an anxiety towards their potential future experience with multi-grade classrooms, and a lack of communication skills. Çam Aktaş's (2016) study shows that teacher candidates have problems with fear and a lack of experience regarding multi-grade classrooms. Sharplin's (2002) research shows that prospective teachers tend to stereotype and lack certain knowledge that may result in prejudices against multi-grade classrooms. In other studies, it is shown that prospective teachers have prejudices that student-centered teaching methods cannot be applied in multi-grade classrooms (Kazu & Aslan, 2016). Even teachers working in multi-grade classrooms stated that they have low self-confidence on this topic (Şahin, 2003). Some prospective teachers perceive multi-grade classrooms to be disturbing (Eker & Sıcak, 2016) and problematic environments (Sidat & Bayar, 2018), or a very

challenging time period (İlter, 2015). All these thoughts and perceptions may reflect an aspect of reality. Studies show that teachers working in multi-grade classrooms experience less job satisfaction and more burnout (İnce & Şahin, 2016). They also encounter more difficulties than teachers working in independent classrooms (Öztürk, 2016). Various studies (Engin, 2018; Khazaei, et al., 2016; Palavan & Göçer, 2017; Şahin, 2003) show that these difficulties are especially related to transportation, accommodation, social life, student and teaching services, school-environment relations, laws and regulations, physical conditions, and supervision. They also draw attention to issues such as time and classroom management, non-teaching roles, the lack of authorized support, low student motivation, and issues of language and justice.

Although they involve various difficulties and are associated with certain negative perceptions, thoughts, and feelings as seen in both this study and other studies, it is necessary to accept that multi-grade classrooms are a reality. Additionally, the educational, social, and emotional contributions it offers to children make multi-grade classrooms indispensable (Grimes, 2019). Therefore, it is important that primary school teacher candidates become well equipped to teach in multi-grade classrooms. However, various studies (Atalay & Yener, 2019; Kazu & Aslan, 2016; Sağ, 2009) point out that education faculties are insufficient in this regard. Therefore, supportive practices and training programs must rise to the occasion. The current research shows that the FSVS program, which is a training program that supports teaching in multi-grade classrooms, is quite effective in many respects.

Rural School Teaching and Communication

The FSVS program makes an important contribution to teacher candidates in terms of teaching and communicating in the village. The participants, who stated that they gained both the valuable perspectives of others and developed multiple/different perspectives during the program, stated that they developed positive feelings towards multi-grade classes and that they have a more positive attitude in many areas. (Teaching profession, village schools/multigrade classes, planning, communication with students and parents, inclusive education and intercultural communication) The study by Babayiğit (2019) also shows that training for multi-grade classrooms can contribute to the positive professional attitude of prospective teachers. There are studies showing that teachers working in village schools have positive attitudes towards performing different applications in multi-grade classes, as well (Raggl, 2015). Therefore, in the present study, the positive

attitude changes in teacher candidates may have resulted from the training conducted on multi-grade classrooms and the positive attitudes of the village school teachers they met throughout the program. Prospective teachers stated that during the program, they had especially improved in the profession of teaching, their knowledge of village schools/multi-grade classes, lesson planning, communication skills with students and parents, inclusive education practices, and intercultural communication skills. They referred to their attitudes towards communication with parents, as well as an ethno-relative attitude in the intercultural sensitivity dimension of intercultural communication. Attitudes towards inclusive education were visible in the emphasis on how important special needs education is. In a study in which preparations for education in village schools were carried out with distance/online education, the project had positive effects on teachers. In the project, it was stated that cultural and professional practices that support teachers during distance education positively affect teacher attitudes (Nutton, Moss, Fraser, McKenzie & Silburn, 2012). This situation can be interpreted as a result of the "obligation" of creating FSVS program in cooperation with the National Education directorates and universities, taking into account the needs of teacher candidates and the structure of village schools/multi-grade classrooms.

Personal-Social Skills

This study shows that the FSVS program positively changed the professional knowledge and skills of teacher candidates and it increased their personal-social skills. In the qualitative findings, prospective teachers stated that they gained new knowledge in terms of village schools/multi-grade classes, the teaching profession, various methods and techniques that can be used in multi-grade classes, peer teaching, inclusive education practices, communication with parents, teacher-student relationship, school-community cooperation, planning and other basic concepts. Research shows that the experience of teachers teaching in village schools/multi-grade classrooms contributes both to the teaching profession and to the learning of the students studying in those classes (Shareefa, 2020; Raggl, 2015). The study by Okamoto and Potane (2020) shows that multi-grade classroom support training and practices increase teachers' professional knowledge and skills. Unlike the practices referred to earlier in the research, the FSVS program did not make this contribution through face-to-face and applied training but rather through online experiences, discussions and knowledge sharing. Although the prospective teachers could not find the opportunity to practice in multi-

grade classrooms/village schools in the research, they met with teachers and experts working in these schools and had the opportunity to learn from their experiences. Therefore, these results are thought to be due to the fact that prospective teachers work with competent teachers and experts in their fields and that they receive experience-based information from people who have experience in this field rather than factual and conceptual information during the application.

Evaluations of the FSVS Implementation Process

It has been observed that the FSVS program positively affects prospective teachers' skills in problem-solving, communication, empathy, organizing inclusive activities, creativity, preparing a plan/program, and self-evaluation. Research shows that training prospective teachers who will work in village schools/multi-grade classrooms supports the learning and readiness of prospective teachers and is necessary (Aksoy, 2008a; 2008b; Azano & Stewart, 2015; Barley, 2009; Boylan et al., 1993; Butler, 2013; Jenkins & Cornish, 2015; Sağ, 2009; Sharplin, 2002). Additionally, research also shows that since applied courses could not be carried out on the field during the pandemic period, educational platforms and applications based on mutual interaction (synchronous) should be expanded in the conduct of these courses in the future (Koç, 2020). In support of this proposal, the FSVS program has demonstrated positive results in both field applications and in distance education based on mutual interaction. The program supports the theoretical lessons in the teaching courses in the multi-grade classrooms in the faculty of education with implementations that focus on mutual interaction. This seems to be due to the fact that the FSVS program was designed with an emphasis on field applications and with the inclusion of people who have experience in the field of field applications in remote education.

Conclusion

In the results of the research, it was seen that the negative attitudes and prejudices of the prospective teachers from before the FSVS program decreased after the FSVS program, and they gained awareness about themselves and their profession. In support of this research, in a study conducted on the experience of village schools with teacher candidates, it was seen that teacher candidates were very interested in teaching in village schools/multi-grade classrooms and experiencing rural schools (Hudson & Hudson, 2008). In rural education, which was defined as a problem area with the changing systems in the early 1900s, the teacher was put at the

center and the preparation of the teacher for this non-modern environment was given priority. In recent years, in the studies on teaching in the village/multi-grade classrooms, special studies have been carried out for these schools and more than one stakeholder has been included in these studies (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Jenkins & Cornish, 2015; Sharplin, 2002). In this study, with the inclusion of these stakeholders in the system, the preparation of the teachers for the field in the pre-service period was provided with multi-faceted support.

Although the prospective teachers expressed the above-mentioned positive outcomes for the FSVS program, they also made some suggestions in order to improve this program. In this context, it is aimed to eliminate the bottleneck in the small group discussions of the FSVS program participants, to organize the program calendar, to offer resource suggestions for the modules, to enrich the content, to make the teacher candidates more active, to make the discussion questions suitable for the level, to shorten the introductory activities, to increase the small group discussions, to avoid repetitive discussion questions, to have more experience sharing, controlling the guest speaker's speaking time, meeting with the children and making observations in the village.

Regarding the conclusion that the FSVS program makes a significant contribution to teacher candidates in terms of teaching and communicating in villages, it can be suggested that the FSVS program should be disseminated in cooperation with the Ministry of National Education and universities with education faculties and implemented in different regions. In addition, rural visits and village school trips can be organized at the beginning of the school year in order to break the prejudices of prospective teachers and to have preliminary knowledge about schools with multi-grade classes.

It can be suggested to design synchronous courses that will provide mutual interaction in the conduct of courses that require practice in distance education. At this point, an interdisciplinary perspective can be determined in the design of the educational process, including information technologies and curriculum development experts. In addition, arrangements can be made in education faculties where prospective teachers can come together with other prospective teachers and teachers from different branches, in order for prospective teachers to prepare for multi-grade classrooms that require them to "create their own programs".

Regarding the results obtained from the fourth sub-problem of the research, in order for the teacher candidates to be more effective in small group discussions in the distance FSVS program, they may be asked to

distribute the topic or content of that day to the prospective teachers, to provide preliminary preparation and to draw a framework for this. In addition, due to the fact that field observations and practices could not be carried out properly during the epidemic period, it may be suggested that field application studies be introduced to teacher candidates in the future and opportunities for this should be provided. In this context, an internship at a village school can be planned for one day a month in Teaching Practice courses, and this study can be implemented with FSVS program.

This research is limited to the specified university and prospective teachers studying at this university. In future research, it can be suggested that field applications for schools with multi-grade classrooms and FSVS program be applied with different variables and in universities. There are also some limitations in this study. In the study, there may be partial inability of prospective teachers' scale-based opinions to reflect the truth. Another note is that teacher candidates have deficiencies in terms of attendance. In addition, the entire research process was carried out on assignments and there is a lack of field applications due to Covid-19.

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