Clarifying the relationship between teacher movement and culture

Article - December 2014

3 authors, including:

Mehmet C. Ayar

22 PUBLICATIONS 80 CITATIONS

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270274678

All content following this page was uploaded by Mehmet C. Ayar on 30 April 2016.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file.
Clarifying the relationship between teacher movement and culture: four teacher profiles

Merve R Niğdelioğlu, Mehmet C Ayar and M Sencer Çorlu

The influence of globalization on teachers can be observed in the increasing numbers who seek jobs abroad. Globalization encourages teachers to seek better professional and living standards elsewhere. What attracts them to live and work beyond their own countries is dependent on their knowledge and skills and the value assigned to them in different places (Varghese, 2009).

The recent increase in the number of these teachers reveals that they have been successful in applying their expertise in new situations, possibly by recasting their instructional methods to fit the culture of their students in their new destination country. Yet teachers are faced with challenges of several kinds during a move from their own country to the host country, or from one host country to another.

Some of these challenges are associated with logistics, whereas others are embedded deep in cultural differences. For instance, initially, the job application and early initiation process can be expected to be challenging; and at later stages, language and communication differences, adaption to a different culture and lifestyle, adaptation of one’s pedagogical methods and materials to those used in the classroom in the host country, and management of the behavior of students are some of the challenges that can be expected to surface (Sharplin, 2009).

In short, teaching in another country is a challenging job in many ways. The main purpose of this study is to clarify mathematics and science teachers’ understanding of teaching and culture, and the relationship between movement between cultures and teaching.

This study is a naturalistic inquiry. We worked with two high school science teachers and two high school mathematics teachers who had teaching experience in various countries and were accessible to us. We utilized face-to-face interviews, classroom observations during formal teaching hours, and several different types of artifact (lesson plans, worksheets, and other instructional materials) as the main data sources. The data were unitized and coded and the emergent patterns were identified and categorized intuitively.

Findings were organized under three themes: (a) profiles of the teachers; (b) teachers’ different views of culture; (c) teacher movement: relocation or mobility?
Profiles of the teachers
Ms Tory was born in California in the United States (politely refused to disclose her age) and taught biology at a school for three years in her home country and then for 21 years in seven schools in Turkey. She enjoys her free time in Istanbul, where she can comfortably support herself through part-time private tutoring.

Mr Ahmet, born in 1973 in Turkey, started his teaching career in Turkey at private schools. Later, he moved to the United States, initially with the Fulbright Teacher Exchange Program and, after working in Turkey for four more years, moved permanently to the United States where he has been teaching at a public school for the last eight years.

Mr John was born in 1958 in Denmark, and has an engineering degree from a Norwegian university. He met a Turkish lady and followed her to Turkey during a period of increasing youth unemployment in his native country. In Turkey, he was able to find work as a mathematics teacher in private schools. He now works as a teacher in one of the elite private schools in Istanbul.

Mr Burak was born in 1978 in Turkey. He had several years of teaching experience at a private national school in Turkey and various international schools in Turkey, Morocco, and Switzerland. After this extensive travel around the world as a teacher, Mr Burak decided to do his doctorate in mathematics education in the United States. He now works as professor of mathematics education in Turkey.

Teachers’ different views of culture
Ms Tory believed that her relocation from the United States to Turkey helped her develop a professional view of the culture. In this regard, she benefited from her short time teaching in multicultural Californian classrooms. Although her students in the Turkish schools were mostly of the same culture, Ms Tory realized that they were not all the same as individuals. She realized that her colleagues were not all the same, either, which had a profound effect on her philosophy as a science teacher:

Sometimes I have to change my view of teaching. I like to think that teaching to me is like a bag of tricks, so some tricks work for some groups and some tricks work for others. You can think that activities are lessons [by themselves] but the more tricks you have, the more tools you can use, the better teacher you can be. If you can learn only one way, maybe that’s great, but if you learn two ways, wow, that’s better, or three ways, wow, you are really tops, you are going to be really good… The more different teachers there are from different backgrounds, schooled in different places, the more opportunities you have to get ideas from them and develop different ideas. They are the resources that you have.

Mr Ahmet indicated that living in a different culture contributed to his personal development because meeting people from different cultures and experiencing
their different points of view helped him see the world differently. ‘I started to watch baseball games instead of soccer to learn their sports culture because I needed to communicate with my students and friends, and to share the same views at some point.’ This displays a more pragmatic approach to culture both in and out of the classroom.

When we asked Mr John whether he developed a culturally diverse perspective when he moved to Turkey, he answered ‘I would hope so,’ indicating his appreciation for cultural diversity. Mr John continued in a different vein from the other respondents by displaying a more objective understanding of culture:

I do not look here at 20 Turkish students; they are 20 individuals. I never look at them as Turks and compare them with other nations. There are lots of different approaches that people from different cultural backgrounds have. So, they may not fit with your approach all the time. You need to experience their ways and be respectful…

When I came to this school 18 years ago there were Turks and some Americans and British. Then, rapidly, under a new Headmaster, they started to hire people from all over the world, which is important. It is important for all students to be exposed to different ideas from everywhere. We all do things differently, and there is no one right way to do it.

I think it is very important for them to be exposed to people [from various places] and to their habits. I think, in the modern world, that is one of the most important things. It is a hard job to break down national barriers, but I think being exposed to such an international environment can help break those barriers.

Mr Burak highlighted the effect of his wide experiences on his teaching practice. ‘I can say that my vision has broadened after I was exposed to all those different cultures in different countries.’ He developed socially, becoming friends with teachers from all over the world and experiencing the way they live, enjoy life, and work as teachers in the international school environment.

He gave a striking example of some of his challenges as an expatriate in Morocco: ‘At the beginning, it was a little bit disturbing to see that some of the local teachers were using their hands to eat their food.’ However, Mr Burak developed a sense of joy in wearing his jellaba (a local Moroccan garment) in his Texas home or wearing his large cowboy hat when he was visiting his brother in Boston.

His enlightenment with respect to the role of culture applied to his out-of-school life as well. For example, the ethnic diversity of Turkey, which has always been a controversial issue in the country, started to look like cultural richness to him. That is, Mr Burak developed an idealizing view of culture.

**Teacher movement: relocation or mobility?**

Teachers’ movement between countries and schools helped them improve their
teaching styles although this improvement did not occur without any challenges. Some of these challenges included adaptation to the conditions and lifestyle in the host country; employment-related issues including finding a job; and particular challenges in the school, including relationships with students, parents and other teachers.

When we asked Ms Tory to talk about her movement from the United States to Turkey, she responded in a way that reflected her adventurous spirit. Although it was a big change and she had some difficulties in adjusting to the Turkish lifestyle, she said, she learned to manage the challenges she encountered by embracing them as interesting cultural differences or perhaps by drawing herself away from a sense of belonging to her birth culture. ‘I find that when I am in America I am not an American; I am Turkish.’

When we asked her about how she feels when she is in Turkey, she responded by referring to the challenges, especially with her distinct physical appearance (she is over 6’3” tall): ‘In Turkey I am not Turkish; I am American. So, I am kind of without a country.’

We gained the impression from what she said that Ms Tory’s mechanism for coping with these challenges included moving from one school to another. However, she had no immediate future plans to move internationally, that is, to leave Turkey.

At the time of this interview, she was celebrating her 21st year teaching in Turkey. Despite all the conversations we had with her, it was still not clear to us in the end whether she was a relocating teacher, who had moved to Turkey for good, or a teacher who chose moving as a lifestyle:

Every time I changed schools, I learned something, mostly positive but sometimes negative. It is fun to learn different things from different places and different people and to do things in different ways. To me, this is enjoyable.

Ms Tory seemed to have relocated to Turkey deliberately with the goal of trying to have fun in life. She defined the worst teachers as the ones ‘who are bored’ or ‘who teach the same way forever’. When she was not ‘having fun’, she preferred to change employers rather than go back to her native country or move to another country. In fact, she had changed schools seven times during her stay in Turkey and in general the reason, as she put it, was boredom.

There were exceptions: sometimes, she simply disagreed with the way that the school was run or some specific policy that bothered her. However, she was confident in her ability to be an effective teacher and never doubted that she would find another job.

Mr Ahmet was a less adventurous person than Ms Tory. Although his students and colleagues described him as a ‘fun guy to hang out with’, we had the impression that he was very cautious in his actions, especially concerning relocation. For example, he decided to move to the United States after...
experiencing American life for only one year in the Fulbright Teacher Exchange Program. Even when he decided to relocate to the United States for good, he moved to the exact same city that he had lived in during that year. Referring to his first temporary relocation, he said that, ‘it helped me learn how to fit into [American] society and culture’. It was apparent that this short experience helped him pedagogically as well:

When I came to the United States in 2003, which was my first time here, my teaching strategies that I used in Turkey did not work for [the American] students. The students here used to learn by doing projects and experiments, and I had few experiences with those activities.

Another benefit of Mr Ahmet’s relocation was that he gained confidence in working with students from a different cultural background than his own. When he relocated permanently to the United States four years after his Fulbright year – now with his new bride – life both in and outside school became easier for him. His wife started her master’s degree while improving her fluency in English. They had a baby, who was born an American citizen. Mr Ahmet found ways to utilize his teaching experience in Turkey by relating it to his teaching in the United States:

There are no major national exams [in the United States] as we have in Turkey. Students take a state exam at the end of 9th grade, and all students have to take it. I said to myself that I could easily analyze these state exams in terms of question types. Thus, I could easily prepare students according to the type of questions.

Mr Ahmet also indicated that his understanding of the curriculum improved as well. That helped him develop a sense of confidence and flexibility in the way he organized his coursework:

I believe that every school should have its own curriculum. In Turkey, we had to follow the curriculum that was imposed on us by the Ministry of National Education. Here, in the United States, I learned about a new curriculum approach. I started to think about the order of topics more deeply because I was allowed to make changes to it. I ordered topics according to their importance or to make them more understandable for my students.

Mr Ahmet used his background with national examinations as a Turkish teacher to his advantage when preparing his students for statewide examinations. He had not believed that his expertise in preparing students for the Turkish centralized tests would ever help him, because he thought exam preparation as an activity was specific to Turkey.

Our observations of his teaching in the Unites States, however, showed us that while he was not teaching to the test per se, he was also not ignoring the reality
that students had to be prepared for it. Mr John emphasized that he needed to relocate to another country because of the increasing youth unemployment in his own country. Meeting a Turkish lady during this time convinced him to relocate to Turkey:

At that point in my life, I did not really have any idea what I was going to do. It was a period in Denmark where there was a lot of unemployment among young people. I tried to work in different areas, as a construction worker and a mathematics tutor but finally I found myself in Turkey as a mathematics teacher.

Mr John said that the things he did during this period of unemployment actually helped him a lot when he started teaching at a local school in Turkey:

In Turkey, there is a tendency to focus only on whatever is going on the blackboard. But the school that I am working at now is way ahead of the other schools in Turkey. We are trying to kill this tendency. I think we succeed at a certain level but we still have a long way to go. We are nowhere close to where I want to be.

We had this idea about ‘independent learners’, where students can go and search out knowledge on their own instead of always depending on their teachers. This kind of idea, and the chance for success when you try something new, comes from our experiences in different places.

You have to be able to improve and get on with it according to needs, and this only comes with experience and willingness.

Mr Burak found that just to get a teaching job at an international school he had to teach subjects other than mathematics, including technology and biology. He said that he could not believe that he had accepted a position teaching biology just to be able to live in Morocco:

I used to hate biology. I failed it so badly at school that I had a negative score on the university entrance exam.

However, he bounced back from the challenges of teaching a subject that he hated. He brought many books with him whenever he moved from one country to another, even though he had to pay for excess baggage as a result.

I compiled my book collection by constantly looking for resources that could help me. The American textbooks I bought from second-hand sellers in Turkey saved my life as an inexperienced teacher. I knew that foreign teachers normally come and go. They sell their textbooks to these places and I was picking up books after them: like a mom tidying her son’s room.

One challenge with respect to moving from one country to another was the
large discrepancies between the socio-economic situations of the schools and countries. For example, Mr Burak experienced a small-scale culture shock when he moved from Morocco to Switzerland. He continued to look for Moroccan food, although he had not really liked it much when he was there. ‘Not only had I just got used to it, I wanted to cherish my time in Morocco now that I was gone. I felt I owed it to Morocco to promote their local culture.’

However, the real shock came when he saw the resources available to him in the international school where he worked in Switzerland. He could not believe that each student was given a laptop. He was encouraged to teach in ways that incorporated these laptops, and enjoyed this experience very much.

Mr Burak’s mobility across countries contributed to his teaching due to the seemingly endless resources he was provided with by the international schools where he worked. ‘Most of my co-workers were either young professionals, with whom it was fun to hang out with outside of the school, or more “old hands,” from whom I learned about teaching.’

Being in communication with experienced teachers and benefitting from their experiences helped Mr Burak develop a diverse repertoire of teaching strategies and a rich collection of resources. He said, ‘Working in different cultures even improved my mathematics knowledge’, explaining:

Division is done differently in different countries. Americans divide differently from the way I learned at school; so do the Japanese and the Spanish. I needed to learn all those different ways in order to ‘talk the same language’ as my students.

In fact Mr Burak proved to be the only truly mobile teacher in our sample; someone who moved from the hot Moroccan deserts to the Swiss Alps, ‘eating tagine one day and steak tartare the other,’ all the while ‘missing former students in Turkey and döner kebab’.

It is evident from the results that teacher movement can be categorized as either ‘mobility’ or ‘relocation’, either internationally or between schools. Mr Burak has been frequently mobile between countries as an international school teacher, while Ms Tory has been mobile between schools in her host country.

Relocation, in contrast, can be understood as one-time permanent settlement, represented by the cases of Mr Ahmet and Mr John. Relocating to another country may require a certain level of careful planning, as in the case of Mr Ahmet. This contrasts with mobile teachers, who seem to have a more adventurous character expressed in their movement decisions.

It may be speculated that relocating teachers are more attracted by the conditions and facilities in the new country or school, or want to widen their professional experience, as opposed to being attracted to mobility per se. Mr John, whose wife is a Turkish national, partially fits into the condition described by Garton (2000): teachers who relocate because of family situations (eg marriage). Although Mr John did not relocate for family reasons only, his
prolonged stay in Turkey may certainly have been facilitated by his marriage to a Turkish lady.

In contrast, mobile teachers may be more interested in an international teaching career. They can be described as those who ‘want to see different places around the world and like the adventure of living in another country’ (Sylvester, 2002 as cited in Yağız, 2014, p 13). In particular they may like working with students from different cultural backgrounds.

All four teachers in the present study have willingly exerted a great amount of effort to do their jobs in the best possible way, despite a number of challenges. Their positive attitudes towards cultural diversity can be understood as emerging from their various interpretations of the notion of culture as a whole: an idealizing view of culture for Mr Burak; a pragmatic approach to culture for Mr Ahmet; an objective understanding of culture for Mr John; and a professional view of culture for Ms Tory.

In summary, from these various life stories it seems clear that mobility or relocation between countries or schools can contribute positively to teachers’ growth and have a rejuvenating effect on their professional and personal lives. Despite the challenges these teachers faced, such as adapting to the lifestyle of the home country and challenges in the classroom, all four of them developed a unique understanding of culture and integrated this understanding into their teaching.

References


Merve R Niğdelioğlu is a high school mathematics teacher at the Koç School in Istanbul, Turkey.

Mehmet C Ayar is a member of the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey.

M Sencer Çorlu is Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Education, Bilkent University.