

My Life-long Learning Experiences

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Mid 70sies, when I first received my diploma as an ESL teacher, I could not apply for a job in the public sector because I was still studying for my second BA at the university in İstanbul, therefore I could not accept a job wherever I would be appointed. I had an evening job as a dormitory and study-hall supervisor at the school where I graduated from. With my teacher's diploma, I looked for a part-time job as an English teacher as I still had to attend some courses at the German Philology. I started teaching English at a private girls high school. I remember with a smile now, paying special attention to my outfit and make-up, because I was teaching seniors, who were very close to my age. In my second year, the school suddenly closed down because Turkey was going through very tough times both politically and economically. I transferred to another private school, but, in the second year, the same scenario repeated. The owner had decided that she cannot deal with the newly establishing teachers' unions and preferred to sell the school to an industrial group that converted the place into a factory. I was disappointed and decided to change the sector.

I opened my translation office. At the beginning it was very difficult because the country was in financial crisis. In time, the business flourished, and there was a staff of ten working with me. However, I started thinking weather this is what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I missed the human contact, being in the school with young, enthusiastic people and started thinking of going back to teaching. Soon, there was an opportunity, the Koç Foundation, which is the biggest philanthropic organization in Turkey had just opened a boarding school with the aim of creating a model school for other Turkish private schools. They were in urgent need of an English teacher, and before I knew I had started teaching again until I retired 24 years later as the Assistant General Director in 2012. During this time, my school supported my professional growth endeavors, giving me the opportunity to grow professionally.

The first summer after I started teaching at the Koç School, the headmaster called me and asked what my plans for the summer were, and if I would like to teach at the Business English program for the executives of the Koç Company or take a group of students to summer school in the States. I chose to go abroad, which had a big impact on my career by opening me up to the international education area. It was a summer language school in Florida ran by an organization called The Experiment. I admired their dynamic and interactive program. The teachers were all coming from a masters program for English teachers, the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA. I learned that they also had a summer masters degree program for international teachers. I felt a great desire to attend it to become a better teacher. I researched the program and asked my school administration if they would help me with the financing. They agreed to pay half the cost. I had a telephone interview and was admitted to the program. For the following two summers I attended intensive eight-week summer school, where I discovered that my strange hunch that kept

bugging me that there must be more to teaching was satisfied. The cost was no holidays for three years, because the following summer was spent on writing the thesis, but I did receive my MA degree at the age of forty.

During these years, although I was not asked to, I shared what I learned with my colleagues at the Koç School. There was one week of shadowing done by my pmy supervisor Donald Freeman for the interim year work. He also gave my colleagues in the department a workshop. My colleagues in the Turkish Department had no English and could not benefit from the written resources in English. I made weekly one-hour workshops in Turkish with them, and organized language lessons for the staff, who wanted to learn language, using the new language teaching techniques I learned. All these affected the school culture, we started doing more team work, and even organized a big conference on interdisciplinary learning for other schools as a result of our teamwork.

Just one year after, in 1994, I was chosen to be a Fulbright Exchange teacher for one year at the New Trier High School in Chicago. That was another great learning experience. I had the opportunity to attend extensive in-service trainings such as TESA (Teacher Expectations, Student Achievement) and orientation exercises. Outside of school, I tried to make use of every opportunity to visit museums, go to theaters and travel. Before returning to Turkey, I attended an International Baccalaureate (IB) Teacher Training in New Mexico because my school back in Turkey had just started the program.

While I was in the States, my headmaster had called me and asked me to accept an administrative position for the following year. Until then, I was adamant about staying in the academic side, but this time he blackmailed me saying, that if I did not agree, he could not allow a friend of mine to apply for the Fulbright program. That was going to be too selfish, so I accepted on the condition that I continued teaching, and for the following 17 years in administration I made sure that I always had a class to teach. I believed that it kept me in the classroom and closer to teachers and students. Another reason for staying on in administration was the question I asked myself. "Do I want to be a change agent and try to help implement changes I believed in, or continue with the status quo? Did I have the right to be frustrated with anything if I did not put my hand under the stone?

As the years passed my career kept unfolding, I had been continuing my life long education with whatever was available in the field of education such as attending weekend conferences, workshops and completing the four one week long summer courses of the Principals Training Center (PTC) over four summers. With a new structuring at the school, which grew into a k-12 school of 2000 students from a 200 students over the ten years I was working there, I assumed the dual role of Assistant General Director and Provost, which gave me the responsibility for the academic program for the entire school. It was a big responsibility because it was the leading Turkish private school, which was founded to be an example for the other schools. The expectations of both the founders and the parents were very high.

Even the Ministry of Education had very high expectations of us and asked us to start some groundbreaking reforms, such as being the leading school in transitioning from a three-year system to a four-year system in high school and start offering two foreign languages instead of only one, before the public schools as a laboratory model school. For the IB, we prepared the School Based Syllabus in Turkish Social Sciences and had the syllabi approved by both the IB and the Ministry of Education. This was a big challenge, but it helped to alleviate extra burden off of our students as well as offering a meaningful, contemporary, interdisciplinary course to our students. All the other Turkish IB schools adopted it as well and for long years, we helped them with its application.

I had the responsibility of the academic program of a school which strived for excellence both locally and internationally. We had introduced the International Baccalaureate system into Turkey, but had to offer it while fulfilling the requirements of the Turkish national program. It was a unique situation, and there was no one or institution to provide the academic support I needed locally. I knew about the doctorate program in education of the University of Bath in England, which was the research center for the International Baccalaureate Organization. I gathered my courage once again to undertake a long academic study part-time while continuing to work full-time at the age of fifty. It was a long and tiresome process because I literally missed out on all school holidays for eight years. During this time, I diverted my attention to theoretical solutions of the academic problems we dealt with in practice at school. I wrote four articles and my thesis was on applying the IB Diploma Program in a Turkish context and its effects on the teachers' teaching styles. It assisted me in guiding the department heads and teachers, and I felt a greater sense of confirmation in the job I was doing bringing the theory and practice together.

Completing my doctoral degree at fifty-eight was a great relief together with satisfaction for me because I like to finish what I undertake. On the other hand, it became a great motivation for my younger colleagues. Many of them started talking of the possibilities of continuing their education in some form. After my masters degree, the same thing had happened, and I had motivated and supported quite a few in pursuing post-graduate degrees while working. This has definitely raised the bar in academic qualifications and the school ethos.

Looking back at my 24 years at the Koç school, I feel thankful to my school that provided me with such an environment to grow professionally. By allocating funds for the professional training of their teachers, they enabled us to make use of life-long learning opportunities. In return, we enriched the learning experiences for all learners in our school as well as other schools by organizing big inter-school conferences for or in collaboration with other schools, such as the Autumn Teachers Conference and The IB Conferences. Now after retirement from the school, I still continue doing these by helping The Turkish Private Schools Association organize numerous workshops and conferences for teachers in Turkey. I enjoy doing it because I also keep learning and discovering and I feel good sharing what I have learned with others. In that way, the community we live in grows together with us and we try to make it a better place for our students, who are our common future.

