



Educational Mobilization of the Society: Gülen Movement

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Abstract

Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner and John Dewey were some of the famous intellectuals who created innovative educational school concepts and fascinated and motivated societies to found private educational institutions in the last century [1]. Today, Fethullah Gülen, Turkish Islamic Scholar and the founder of the so-called Hizmet (Service) Movement, which is also known as the Gülen Movement, also impressed millions of people to found educational institutions inside and outside of Turkey in the last five decades [2]. Through the internationalization process of the movement after the Soviet Dissolution, different Gülen inspired educational institutions were also founded outside of Turkey and expanded this type of schooling to the world [3]. The purpose of this paper is to describe the progressive education model of these Gülen inspired schools and to examine the methodology of Gülen during the mobilization of the society to found such a kind of educational institution. A qualitative research design is used to study this issue. Semi-structured expert interviews are conducted with managers of the Gülen Inspired Schools from three continents: Europe, Africa and the US and scientific experts of the subject. The results show that the education model of Gülen inspired schools depends on reforming the management of a traditional education system, instead of reforming teaching or pedagogy. This new type of management is based on a philosophy of "Global thinking, Local acting" and managers of these schools accomplish this philosophy in three steps such as cooperation and collaboration with the local environment, contributing to local needs or solving local problems and building international connections and partnerships. Through these steps, educational systems in these schools are based on global, secular, moral and ethical values, instead of religious values, but at the same time they empower the local cultural values through international contests. The participation of the community with this type of schooling and the connection between Gülen inspired schools and society is also described in this paper.

Keywords: *Gülen Inspired Schools, Financial Mobilization, Human Resources, Globalization*

1. Introduction

Especially after the end of the Cold War, financial and economic relations between countries worldwide increased and the economist Theodore Levitt described this change in global economics affecting production, consumption and investment with a new Term "**globalization**" [4]. Gülen, who already canalized his followers to the private education sector and schooling since seventies, saw this trend in the early nineties and motivated his followers to expand a similar type of STEM based private schools all around the world. Depending on the growth and quantitative expansion, it could be said that Gülen inspired schools and tutorial centers have a significant success worldwide in private schooling sector in the last three decades. How Gülen and his followers achieved this success and what's the common features of these schools in depending on financial structure, Human Resources and global schooling strategy are some of the research questions of the researcher in his PhD studies from 2016 to 2020 [5]. This paper is an expansion of the results of this research and adds several new perspectives to this controversial subject.

2. Results

Unlike the religious schools in Turkey, so-called *Imam Hatip Lisesi*, and despite Gülen's religious background, the major difference of this type schooling is its strong structure based on global ethical values, instead of religious values and science education with different STEM courses [6]. The first remarkable feature of these schools in STEM education is their modern facilities with high tech labs. All nine visited schools have laboratories and they use modern technology like smart boards in their classrooms.

"So, the normal schools and the Gülen schools are similar. The Gülen schools are even better. They use modern pedagogy, everything possible and modern technology."

Said Expert 8, who criticizes the movement from different perspectives.

Of course, as it is easy to predict, to realize such a kind of project, the movement needs financial sources first. Later, such kinds of institutions has to be run by teachers and administrators with good



experience and quality. In addition to these points, a wise clear global strategy is also needed to keep the movement's schools in a high position in global competitions. It was observed in the field study that the management on these three components supports the success of the Gülen inspired schools.

2.1 Financial Mobilization of the Society for the GIS

From a sociological perspective, Ebaugh researched the Gülen movement and asked how Gülen convinced the society to invest in the educational projects of the movement [7]. As a result, she found that Gülen had a reformist approach to Islam and interpreted basic Islamic financial practices in a new form. As a concrete example "*Zakat*" or almsgiving to poor people, is one of the five pillars of Islam, and Gülen motivated his followers to invest these almsgiving to poor students in GIS as a scholarship. Similarly other Islamic practices like "*Sadaka*" (Charity), "*Himmat*" (To help), "*Vakif*" (Foundation), "*Kurban*" (Sacrifice fast)etc ... are recreated by Gülen in his speeches which mobilized the Turkish society to invest more on educational projects of the movement in and out of Turkey [8]. On the other hand, it was observed during the field study that, such a kind of contribution has a crucial role only during the first few years of these schools. Later on, it was expected from all schools to finance themselves with tuitions and expand their activities with the profit that they achieved because of their work [9].

In addition to Islamic roots and religious practices, there are two other common features behind the financial mobilization of the society for the educational activities of the movement such as trust and consultation. It was observed in the field study and also in previous research that Gülen himself and his followers have pious lifestyle without any luxury [10] and the financial transparency in these institutions is one of the core focal points of the movement in their projects. Therefore, the society trusts these organizations and supports them financially. Besides, it is clear to see that Gülen presents different projects for different time frames depending on the conditions of the movement and the needs of the environment. Instead of dictating, Gülen discusses his ideas with his followers and makes common decisions which make sense in his followers minds and they internalize his vision [11]. Consequently, success is seen more in movement activities and loss is very rare because of the realistic and common approach of the projects.

2.2 Human Resources Mobilization for the GIS

The second important issue is to find or recruit the teachers and administrative staff in these schools. Among many other different problems in Turkey, Gülen is concerned about the small number of educators and, due to the lack of educators, for the future of Turkey [12]. Therefore, the first expert participant of the field study, who is a very close follower of Gülen, mentioned that for more than three decades they encouraged their good students to study at the educational faculties of the universities. Besides, the second school manager participant of the study has a computer engineering degree, but because of the need, he later studied educational sciences in his Master and shifted to the education sector. As a result, the movement gained an educational staff who both know Gülen's philosophy and their qualifications before the international expansion part.

According to first expert participant of the study, through the international expansion period of the movement, these teams used the network structure of the movement and moved to the different regions of the world. Therefore, the staff in GISs in Turkey, first moved to Middle Asia and then to the other parts of the world, except Europe. In the field study, it was observed that in general teachers and educators of the movement in Europe are the children of the immigrants of the Turkish minority. Therefore, in comparison to the other parts of the world, the movement first expanded the immigrant Turks, which is the important minority in Europe first, and then they targeted the majority of the society.

In one way or another, initially these teachers and administrators cooperated with the local authorities and founded these schools together. Previous studies demonstrated that the majority of the teachers in GISs outside of Turkey consists of local people who have very little knowledge about Gülen and his philosophy [13]. In the field study in nine schools on three continents, such as Europe, Africa and the U.S., the average of these local teachers makes almost 75% of the whole teaching staff. The question in this point is how the movement practices its educational philosophy with these 25%. As an answer to this question, it was observed in the field study that a common school culture was created where everybody comes together on a common ground in the school environment. The third school manager participant from Europe explains this issue as follows:

"The difference between the two (Turkish Teachers and local teachers) was much more, but now the differences are decreasing. So, these two reasons may be, foreignization of Turkish teachers or



Turkification of foreign teachers. As time goes by and it is understood from both sides. They approached each other with a little understanding on both sides."

2.3 Global thinking and Local Acting Strategy of the GIS

According to different studies GISs are founded by local foundations or local associations, mostly consist by Gülen followers and despite this common culture and principles, the schools do not have any financial or organizational connection to the other GISs around the world or to Gülen himself [14]. Therefore, it is impossible to find any information about Gülen and his movement in the website of these schools or in their advertisement campaigns. Such a practice is criticized by several scholars like Hendrick who describes Gülen by using the word "ambiguous" [15]. However, especially after the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016, political pressure on the Gülen movement [16], human rights violations against Gülen followers in Turkey [17] and several kidnapping activities of Turkish Secret Service against the teachers of GISs out of Turkey [18], demonstrated that there is an important reason behind this practice. Actually, Gülen witnessed the pressure of the State on the minorities in Turkey [19] or the coups history of the early Republic in his adolescence and early career. Later, being aware of the undemocratic structure of Turkish State, he tried to protect his followers and their institutions through a secretive strategy since it was founded. On the other hand, Gülen was aware that there could be people who could be upset about his secular, ethics based education philosophy, which is focused on science and STEM education in GISs, just because of his background as an Islamic scholar. To remove these obstacles, Gülen and his movement could prefer to use this practice. It is difficult to analyze the exact reason behind this practice, but in one way or another, especially after the failed coup attempt, the GISs worldwide left their Turkish identity and act like local schools in their region. As a concrete example, two schools in the field study changed their names and prefer to use local names like the name of their region or the name of a famous thinker or writer who lived there before in their schools. Besides, GISs have a very close relationship with local authorities in their regions and; therefore, they are aware of local conditions and needs. As an example, GISs in Africa conduct several charity activities and try to contribute to their poor local environment. Schools in Europe and in the US have different activities to fulfill different gaps in their regions. Despite this more localization strategy, the network structure of the movement allows these schools to build national and international cooperation's with each other in ease. Specific experiences and know-how extend easily to the other GISs and these schools sometimes cooperate with each other in different fields like human resources management or financial investments [20]. Consequently, GISs practice global thinking and local acting philosophy in their schools and have a clear advantage to the other schools in their regions in local and global competition.

3. Discussion

As a final word, Gülen envisioned an education system depending on global ethical values on the one hand and science, technology and modern education methods on the other hand. From different perspectives it is clear to see that Gülen and his movement realized and practiced this vision perfectly inside and outside of Turkey. In this paper, only three components of the methodology like financial mobilization, human resource mobilization and global network connection of these schools are analyzed. In addition to these points, due to its fifty-year history in private schooling, the movement also has a rich experience in the private education sector and are very professional in their job. Consequently, because of mentioned reasons, despite the loss of some schools in some countries, which have a close political connection with Turkey [21], GISs worldwide could stand against the political pressure of the Erdogan regime since 2016 and in the field study it was observed that the impact of the pressure is gone today. Depending on these conditions, it could be said that the movement and their schools transformed their identity by leaving their Turkish roots and becoming more local and decentralized in the future.

4. References

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