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Nationality and Culture as Factors Influencing Creativity Levels in Candidate Teachers: A Comparative Study between the United States and Turkey

Abstract

Through this study, students in their corresponding countries were led in identical activities allowing them to express themselves freely. The study observed differences in creativity among diverse students. The findings of this research challenge fundamental assumptions concerning levels of creativity displayed by particular cultures.

Keywords: creativity, culture, teacher preparation internationally, Turkey, United States

Introduction: Rationale of the study

The recent exponential increase in globalization, requires higher levels of creativity and competitiveness not necessary in our recent past. In order to meet the new demands of education in a global society, teacher preparation programs must provide students with opportunities for the development and nurturing of a natural approach to creativity. Yet, creativity must also be understood within the context of nationality and culture. Relating culture and creativity requires in-depth examination. Often, individualist and collectivist cultures are coupled with particular perceived levels of creativity. For instance, individualist cultures are perceived as cultures fostering creativity through independence and personal inquiry, while collectivist cultures might be perceived as formed by groups of individuals conforming to the norms of the majority, and consequently, less creative.

In general, the development and implementation of educational systems promoting creativity, regardless of their cultural context, result from intentional transformational changes involving functioning processes, mission, and culture of entire organizations. However, in numerous contexts, the idea of independence and creativity in education has not been regarded as a priority from an institutional perspective. In these cases, individuals still have the capacity to promote the integration of creativity in the particular context of their department or classroom. These small changes may be derived from minor adjustments and improvements in one or few dimensions of leading, teaching, and classroom management (Goodman, 1982; Law, 2007; Levy & Merry, 1986).

During the 2013-2014 – 2014-2015 academic years, university students in teacher-training programs in Turkey and the United States were provided with an opportunity to display their creativity as they were asked to work in small groups and explain the concept of differentiated instruction. The participants were provided with large-size sheets of paper, regular pencils, color pencils, color markers, and

given unlimited freedom to define the term, the reasons for its existence, and provide practical examples of its implementation.

The following sections provide the contextual and educational backgrounds of both, Turkey and the United States, and a brief review of the meanings of culture and creativity. We also provide our findings, a discussion of these findings, and additional sections addressing the conclusions of our study, and its implications for teachers and leaders in education.

Contextual background

Country profiles: United States and Turkey

United States

Geography

The United States is located in North America, bordering both the North Atlantic Ocean and the North Pacific Ocean, between Canada and Mexico. With an area of 9,826,675 square kilometers, the United States is roughly 12 times the size of Turkey.

Demographics

The United States has a total population of 326,625,791 inhabitants (July 2017 estimates); roughly four times the population of Turkey, with a median age of 37.8 years. The country's age structure is as follows: 0-14 years, 18.73%; 15-24 years, 13.27%; 25-54 years, 39.45%; 55-64 years, 12.91%; and 65 years and over, 15.63%. The most highly represented ethnic groups living in the United States are: White, 79.96%; Hispanic, 15.1%; Black, 12.85%; Asian, 4.43%; and two or more races, 1.61%. 82.1% of the population of the United States speaks English as their first language, 10.7% Spanish, 3.8% other Indo-European languages, and 2.7% of the total population speak other Asian and Pacific Island languages as their first language (The World Factbook, 2018).

Turkey

Geography

Turkey is located in both Southeastern Europe and Southwestern Asia (the portion of Turkey west of the Bosphorus is geographically part of Europe), bordering the Black Sea, between Bulgaria and Georgia, and bordering the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, between Greece and Syria. The country is strategically located, as it controls the Turkish Straits (Bosphorus, Sea of Marmara, and Dardanelles) that link the Black and Aegean Seas. With an area of 783,562 square kilometers, Turkey is roughly the size of Texas and Arkansas combined.

Demographics

Turkey has a total population of 80,845,215 (July 2017 estimates), roughly one quarter of the total population of the United States, with a median age of 30.2 years. The country's age structure is as follows: 0-14 years, 24.68%; 15-24 years, 15.99%; 25-54 years, 43.21%; 55-64 years, 8.58%; and 65 years and over, 7.53%. The most highly represented ethnic groups living in Turkey are: Turkish, 75%; Kurdish, 18%; and other minorities, 12%. Turkish is the official language, with other minority languages spoken, particularly in the east (The World Factbook, 2018a).

An overview of the requirements to join the teaching profession in Turkey and the United States

Teacher training in Turkey

In order to become a teacher within the public education system of Turkey, it is necessary to have a bachelor's degree from an accredited higher education institution. Candidates to the teaching profession must have an academic major and teacher training courses.

Upon graduation and, in order to be certified to teach in public schools, candidates must successfully complete and approve the Public Personnel Selection Examination. Once candidates have approved this exam, they must complete a one-year-long internship program. Following this internship, candidates must also complete and approve the Teacher Candidacy Education Exam in order to be granted a fully-qualified teacher status.

Furthermore, candidates with academic backgrounds other than education, and who wish to join the teaching profession, may enroll in pedagogical formation certificate programs approved and monitored by the Higher Education Council. This model has recently increased its popularity, as contributes to the meeting of the increasing demand for qualified teachers in the country.

Currently, there are 180 higher education institutions in Turkey, 112 of which are public, and 68 private. Traditional teacher training programs are provided by Faculties of Education within universities. At present, there are 65 Faculties of Education in public universities and 7 in private universities throughout the country (Turkish higher education management system, 2018; Turkish higher education council, 2018).

Teacher training in the United States

Given the decentralization and independence of every state with regard to the provision of public education in the United States, and since the American component of this study was conducted in Texas, the following section addresses the requirements necessary to join the teaching profession in the state of Texas.

In order to become a teacher in the public education system of Texas, it is necessary to have a bachelor's degree from an accredited higher education institution. Candidates to the teaching profession must have an academic major and teacher training courses. Upon completion of a bachelor's degree, and a six-month internship as a student-teacher in a recognized learning center, the candidate must successfully complete and approve the teacher certification tests for the subject and grade level of their interest established by the State Board of Education (Texas Education Agency, 2018).

As in Turkey, candidates with academic backgrounds other than education, and who wish to join the teaching profession in the state of Texas, may enroll in alternative certificate programs. At present, there exist a total of 144 institutions providing teacher training programs in the state of Texas. Of those institutions, 76 are provided as university based and post-baccalaureate programs by higher education institutions and 111 are alternative/accelerated certification programs offered to individuals already holding advanced degrees (Texas Education Agency, 2018a).

Culture and creativity

At this point, we believe it pertinent to acknowledge the fact that much has been written concerning the notions of culture and creativity. These two terms are often defined in broad, and often conflicting, terms that involve an overabundance of factors influencing their development and existence. The following section provides a brief analysis, and succinct definitions, of culture and creativity from a standpoint relevant to our study.

Culture

Culture is formally defined as the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group (Merriam-Webster, 2018). The notion of culture is often analyzed from the perspective of not only objective, but explicit and implicit factors connected to acquired behaviors, which are, in turn, transmitted through traditions and symbols (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). In other words, culture is a rather organic, fluid concept permeating all aspects of society and transferred through language, art, and accepted patterns of behavior and socialization (Masemann, 2003). Culture, and group affiliation “are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to representation” (Hall, 1994, p. 292).

Now, if culture includes everything, it explains nothing. In order to create a clear, basic understanding of this complex term, we suggest culture to be arbitrarily defined as the values, attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions generally accepted by a particular group within a society (Harrison & Huntington, 2000).

Creativity

Like culture, creativity is a notion with immense and conflicting approaches to its understanding and definition. In its most basic form, creativity is the “ability to create” (Merriam-Webster, 2018a). Some argue that creativity is a general characteristic displayed by all. Others say that creativity is domain specific. Some conceptualize creativity within the context of control, ownership, relevance, innovation, possibility thinking, problem-posing, inventing, questioning, and self-confidence, among others (Jeffrey & Craft, 2001). Some understand creativity as a changing agent; an act or idea that changes an existing domain into a new one (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Consequently, from this particular perspective, an act of creativity is only relevant if its results are accepted as paradigm change agents by the gatekeepers of the domain (e.g. art critics, teachers, scientists). Creativity is also understood as the capacity for invention of innovative ideas or products having an appropriate value to the cognitive demands of specific, particular situations (Weisberg, 1993).

For our purposes, creativity may be subjectively defined as the tendency to generate or recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems in ways acceptable by either a particular society or humanity as a whole.

Culture and creativity in Turkey and the United States

Turkey is traditionally considered as a collectivist society, and the United States is typically classified as individualist (Leong, 2013). Based on this assumption, Turkish culture, being group oriented, could be considered less conducive to creativity and freedom than American, and individualist, culture. However, studies comparing creativity levels between Turkish and American students suggest that creative abilities are similar among both groups (Oral et al., 2007). In this study we observe which one of these visions Turkish and American students conform to.

Methodology

Comparisons are an essential requisite to understand others' positions but, ultimately, a requisite to understanding ourselves. Also, and as stated by Robinson in his seminal work in 1969, we understand that international comparisons contribute to the integrity, and promote the challenging of the principles and structures of national education systems. With these principles in mind, the present is a descriptive, qualitative study conducted through a functional observation of two systems by means of comparative analysis (Lauterbach & Mitter, 1998). Furthermore, the criteria for the selection of the activities conducted through this comparative study were based upon the fact that they provide space for pedagogical innovations. The study required a significant change in the traditional roles of teachers and students; promoted active, independent, and self-directed learning (i.e. creativity); engaged students in collaborative work; and allowed for the expression of individual and cultural learning differences (Law, 2007).

The *setting* of this study took place in academic years 2013-2014 – 2014-2015, at universities in the two countries observed. The authors communicated through electronic media in order to consolidate and analyze the data gathered from Turkey and the United States. The *actors* are the authors themselves, as they facilitated the activities conducted, as well as the students in teacher-training programs in the two different countries, as they formulated the responses to the activities assigned to them. The *events* in the study refer to the conducting of parallel activities between students and professors in Turkey and the United States with regard to students' definition of differentiated instruction through freedom to display their own creativity by means of group collaboration. The *process* involved the corresponding provision of materials (large sheets of paper, pencils, color pencils, and color markers) to students in both countries, the consistent presenting of directions on the part of the instructors, the matching set of expectations for students in both countries (definition of "differentiated instruction" in groups of three), as well as the collection and comparison of responses provided by students (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Categories of comparison

Aim

We have ventured into the comparison of issues concerning creativity levels displayed by students in the United States and Turkey. The aim of this comparison is to gain a better understanding of different educational systems embedded in two different cultures, and their effect on creativity levels displayed by candidate teachers. Consequently, through this comparative study, we intend to make a

contribution to the improvement of education and schooling in our countries, and subsequently, to international educational policy, resulting in the betterment of national and local education systems.

Base

The base of our comparison, determined by the comparability of the subjects taken into account (Lauterbach & Mitter, 1998), rests upon two teacher preparation programs with students of similar ages housed in parallel learning environments and educational institutions. Additionally, the events and activities compared were led and conducted by instructors with similar academic backgrounds – both holding PhD degrees from institutions in the United States.

Process

The *process* of comparison followed by this study is the investigation of “educational issues and conditions that exist in more than one national educational system ... or in the world” (Rust et al., 1999, p. 94). In order to conduct this process of comparison, students were arranged in groups of three, provided with similar materials, and given complete freedom to generate their own definition of differentiated instruction. This process was conducted with the purpose of observing the differences between creativity levels displayed through similar processes enacted in two educational systems.

Findings

United States

Students in the United States used colors, and drawings sparingly. Although few drawings were included as part of their assignment, American students chose to use mostly words, with few illustrations. The students were careful with their writing and formation of letters. Care was taken to proper spelling. US students chose to use words more abundantly than drawings. Although some did not stray from using words in the totality of the assignment, American students added color to some of the written words mainly by alternating colors of words or letters. Color was also used in drawings and illustrations. Illustrations included the creation of a table for some students, and actual pictorial drawing for others but, as stated above, these were used sparingly. Most students chose to use illustrations and drawings to give examples of differentiated instruction. However, no group of students utilized illustrations throughout the entirety of the assignment.

Turkey

Contrary to the expected results, most students in Turkey used colors and illustrations abundantly with a less frequent use of words than their American counterparts. Turkish students, for the most part, chose to use different colors, even when their responses were fully submitted in writing. And although some students concentrated in completing this activity through words only, these represented a minority among the totality of the participants. Whether as added decoration to the basic requirements of the assignment, or as illustrations fully answering the questions posed without any text included, most Turkish students relied on the use

of colorful and creative illustrations as part of their responses to the assigned task. Out of the totality of Turkish participants, only one group of students completed the assignment using a single color pen in the entirety of their final product. The rest of the participants used different colors ranging from the organization of the sections, to decorations, to drawings representing their views. When given the freedom to choose self-expression, most Turkish students did not rely on the use of words for the completion of the task. And those Turkish students whose main medium of expression is writing, still chose to add color to their writing and complementary colorful decorations surrounding their text. Most Turkish students, although not required to, incorporated different illustrations/drawings as part of their assignment. These illustrations ranged from drawings of differentiated classrooms, diverse students, different activities, body parts representing different learning styles, plants, forests, and decorations in the form of flowers and stars.

Discussion

Through this study, our pre-conceived notions of creativity and culture have been challenged. The assumption that American culture, being more individualist, would produce more creative individuals, and that Turkish culture, being more collectivist, would produce less creative individuals, has been put to the test.

Many questions remain. The study, conducted within the realm of formal education, undoubtedly limits our ability to generalize across cultures and nations. Nonetheless, within the framework of the requirements of both national education systems, and particularly, within the context of meeting the requirements necessary to enter the teaching profession both, in Turkey and the United States, the findings of this study shed new light into the pre-conceived ideas of the freedom, or lack thereof, students are permitted to enjoy as they take responsibility for their own academic development.

The findings of this study demonstrate the existing dissonance between our self-perceptions and the reality observed in our local environments. The study challenges the results of our self-assessment, and self-perception with regards to our level of creativity. The study begs us to review our answers to the questions of “am I as creative as I believe I am?” and “do my culture and education system limit my creativity in the ways I believe them to do?”.

Also, from an educator’s point of view, this study questions if our understanding of academic achievement functions as a block for our students’ creativity and personal development. For instance, our findings demonstrate that, within the context of our study, American students were concerned with following directions, although brief, exactly as they perceived them. While the intent of the study was for the students to feel that any method of expression was acceptable, they did not exhibit this in completing the task. Whether or not the message was conveyed as intended is something the researcher in the US grappled with when reflecting on the students’ work. When observing the work of both American and Turkish students, it is evident that the Turkish students, for the most part, used a wider variety of means to express themselves as they completed the activity. They were less likely to “color inside the lines” than the American students.

We also understand that writing is certainly a creative way to express ourselves. Nevertheless, we understand that, in the traditional educational setting, writing tends

to be one of the more highly respected means to academic achievement. Consequently, writing, when compared to drawing, singing, or dancing, tends to be more highly revered as a measure of academic achievement and success. Academic growth and development are paramount, and yet, we must consider the importance of not limiting our students, in our case, the future educational leaders of our countries, by imposing pre-conceived notions of what academically acceptable standards and creativity should look like. We must observe our own teaching practices and self-assess the pre-conceived ideas of our own level of creativity -high or low- resulting from our particular national and cultural contexts.

Conclusion

This study chronicles the experiences of two university professors, one in Turkey and the other in the United States, as they observe their students in teacher preparation programs complete the same assignment. The purpose of the study was to observe how students chose to exhibit different levels of creativity as they demonstrated their understanding of the meaning of differentiated instruction. The students were given the same supplies and guidelines and were then given the freedom to interpret and report their knowledge as they chose.

The professors then studied the students' work and observed the similarities and differences in their products based on the levels of creativity displayed by members of two distinct cultures. The study relied on defining creativity as a tendency to generate and organize ideas in ways useful to solve problems, and culture as the specific attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions of a particular group.

Although it is perceived that students in the United States are more individualist, and therefore, more creative than students in Turkey, who are believed to be more collectivist, and therefore more easily conformed to group standards (Leong, 2013), the results were not as expected. Contrary to general belief, in our particular context, Turkish students displayed considerably higher levels of creativity than their American counterparts.

This study served as a model of comparisons constituting an essential requisite to understand others, but ultimately, an essential requisite to understand ourselves. The study also provided a space for pedagogical innovations since, as an additional unexpected result, the researchers, fundamental actors in this study, were confronted and challenged to reexamine their role in the classroom as promoters, or suppressors, of creativity.

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