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Using a Narrative Inquiry Approach to Explore a Foreign Students' Experience at an English-Medium University in Turkey

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In this paper, I will narratively inquire (Xu & Connelly, 2009; Clandinin & Connelly, 2006) into a Middle-Eastern graduate student's learning experiences at an English-medium university in Turkey. Turkey is currently in a state of political, economic, institutional and educational reform; in part, due to its pursuit of membership into the European Union (Koc, Isiksal, & Bulut, 2007). As part of its educational reforms, Turkey is seeking to attract foreign students to its universities "to improve the quality and cultural composition of the student body, gain prestige, and earn income" (Altbach & Knight, 2007). As I learned in conversations with my participant, a foreign university graduate student in his third year of study, there are several tensions that arise from his time in Turkey, particularly as he got lost within this new educational landscape. This leads me to question how Higher Educational institutions, in European contexts like Turkey, can better support the needs of an increasingly international student body. Understanding how to better accommodate foreign students through policy reforms, I suggest, may improve the educational experiences of foreign students whose voices can be limited due to their unfamiliarity with the new systems and culture in which they are situated.

Key Words: Narrative Inquiry, Higher Education Policy, English-medium University, Foreign Student Experience

I. Introduction and Purpose of Study

The purpose of my study is to explore a foreign students' experience, Ahmad, in an English-medium university in Turkey through a narrative inquiry (NI) approach (Xu & Connelly, 2009). I will use narrative as the vehicle through which I will try and understand my research. NI (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is a way of

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inquiring and understanding peoples' experience through, "collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). This idea of continuity over time is not new to education as it was first highlighted by John Dewey (1938) and adapted for NI. Dewey proposed that "one criterion of experience is continuity, namely, the notion that experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). Dewey's ontological approach then is that these experiences are not transcendental, but instead *interactional*. Therefore, "the regulative ideal for inquiry is to generate a new relation between a human being and her environment –her life, community, world" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 39). In other words, "our representations (of the world around us) arise from experience and must return to that experience for their validation" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 39). This central idea of NI comes to the forefront when a researcher is attempting to understand stories as they are lived and told along this 'continuum' of an individual's life. These moments of experience, "stories lived and told" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20), have been slowed down and analyzed. Field texts that were created with Ahmad, inform a narrative account of his experience. According to Clandinin and Connelly, "narrative [can be understood] as both a phenomena under study and method of study" (2000, p. 2). It is my hope that this research project provides insights into my research phenomenon as well as honors the stories of my research participant as he navigated the Turkish educational and cultural landscape as a foreign student.

1.1 The Advent of Stories

Stories have been relating human experience since early humans began to talk. "These lived and told stories and the talk about the stories are one of the ways that we fill our world with meaning and enlist one another's assistance in building lives and communities" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 35). Hence, looking at the world through the lens of storytelling is certainly nothing new and is somehow innately tied to the way we experience the world around us. What is new, according to Clandinin and Rosiek, is the "emergence of narrative methodologies in the field of social science research" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 35). Moreover, narrative has become a way of knowing about the world and NI, largely developed by Connelly and Clandinin (1990), outlines an alternative way of thinking about how narrative and experience relate.

Any discussion of experience, particularly when it is linked to education, needs to acknowledge the works of John Dewey. Dewey described the term *experience* as something that is both personal and social, both always being

present. "People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). Hence, this idea helps us to understand how an educational experience involves everyone from the learner to the community members and beyond as well as their relation to each other. Another important Deweyan idea that has given support to the NI way of thinking is *continuity*. This is the notion that:

"Experiences grow out of out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences. Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum – the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future – each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2)

Dewey (1976) built on this idea by inquiring further into the concept that experience is continuous. Furthermore, he understood experience as something that "stretches" into the realms of personal, aesthetic, and social meaning. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) adapted this Deweyan concept and created the 'commonplaces' of NI, which will be explored in more detail later. What is important to understand, however is that experiences can be seen as temporally and socially situated within a place. This means that many understandings can emerge through a careful analysis of an experience, which includes what has led up to the experience, what factors shaped the experience, and the meaning that experiences communicate.

II. Introduction to Narrative Inquiry Framework

The commonplaces (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) of temporality, sociality and place are used to explore each story and unpack my own understandings of these events. NI approaches concern themselves with relationships of people and their lived experiences. The complexity of the relational composition of people's lived experiences both inside and outside of an inquiry can help to nurture understanding and meaning, which, ultimately, can inform a study as it progresses. By this, I mean our lives are filled with a web of complex relationships and experiences, both contextual and temporal, that form deep roots into who we are as people and researchers. It is within these complexities that many in the sciences view NI with contempt and criticism. Many believe that scientific research is spoiled by these kinds of approaches and complexities. Yet, it is this very relationship with our lived experiences and other people that creates, "richness and depth and allows insights that would otherwise not be possible"

(Craig & Huber, 2007, p. 255). Thus, it is through embracing these relational complexities that an NI approach is used to explore a foreign student's experiences in an English-medium university in Turkey.

2.1 The Commonplaces of Temporality, Sociality, and Place

The three commonplaces specify the dimensions and help researchers to understand the conceptual framework of NI (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). The three commonplaces are “temporality, sociality, and place – which specify dimensions of an inquiry space” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p.479). Attending to the dimensions of the commonplaces simultaneously is what distinguishes NI from other methodological approaches to research. Therefore, the complexity of relational composition of people's lived experiences, as referred to in the last section, can only be understood through attending to the three commonplaces at the same time (Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray Orr, 2007).

The ‘commonplaces’ were used to explore and slow down my personal narratives as well as my participant's experiences. Each commonplace is used as a guide to help unpack an experience contextually, socially and temporally. The first commonplace is temporality or the view that, events and people always have a past, present, and a future” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 23). In other words, we need to understand that a narrative is constantly in transition and that it cannot be isolated within the time period of the story itself but is seen on a continuum. The second commonplace is sociality, which is comprised of two conditions: personal and social. “By personal conditions we mean the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions” (Connelly & Clandinin, *Narrative Inquiry*, 2006, p. 480). When Connelly and Clandinin talk about the ‘social’, they want to draw attention to the existential conditions such as the environment, people, surrounding conditions, and so forth that make-up an individual's context. It is important to note here that one further condition that Connelly and Clandinin (2006) make clear about the social is that the relationship between the individual and inquirer is another dimension to consider. This is particularly important for this research as it involves a singular participant, Ahmad. “Inquirers are always in an inquiry relationship with participants' lives. We cannot subtract ourselves from this relationship” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). The final dimension is place, which means, “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequence of places where the inquiry and events take place” (2006, p. 480). The key to understanding place is to recognize that each narrative and event happens in a physical place whether it transpires at school, home, in a conversation in a café, or even within the country where the experience takes place. This is crucial because an “inquirer needs to think through

the impact of each place on the experience” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 23).

III. Processes of the Research Study

Lives are complex. For this reason, we must understand that a participant's stories started before our interest in the research began and will continue long after the research is finished. This consideration allows researchers to better situate their understanding and inquiries into this ongoing 'living story.' Moreover, serious deliberation on how the research may affect a participant's life, in the broadest senses, needs to be carried out. This leads a researcher to question the justification, methodology and ethical concerns that arise in the midst of a research inquiry.

3.1 Field Texts

The primary form of data collected for this research project are field texts, which are the recorded interviews I had with the student participant. This interview process started informally with conversations and interactions in class (between teacher and student) leading to interim field texts. These interim field texts were then used to not only help direct the interview process but also to contribute to the interpretive process by allowing me, the researcher, to negotiate meaning with Ahmad, my participant in the study. The aim of these interviews was to ensure that the “participants intentions are the uppermost” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 111). This was accomplished by allowing Ahmad, my participant, to tell his own stories in his own way (Anderson & Jack, 1991). I am confident that the comfortable location, of a coffee shop, for the interview process and the familiar relationship with me, as the researcher, was conducive to this kind of autobiographical account of the participant's experience. Additionally, these experiences have been written down to form interim field texts. Initially, my research puzzle came about because of experiences I had as a teacher in a classroom with foreign students. These experiences, written into journals and as reconstructed memories, were used as interim field texts during the interview process. These interim field texts provided a springboard for the interview questions and inquiries. Moreover, detailed field notes were made during the interview process. These detailed field notes helped me, as the researcher, to jot-down important or significant moments during the interview process. These, “constructed representations of experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 106) during the interview process, or further interim field texts, were used in subsequent interviews during the interpretive process so meaning could be negotiated and confirmed by my participant.

3.2 Analysis

According to Connelly and Clandinin, moving away from field texts into research texts is a difficult process but very important (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 129). When the interview process with my participant came to an end, it was difficult to distance myself from these meetings and focus only on the field texts in order to compose my final narrative account. “This does not imply that the close relationships with participants have ended but rather that the relationships shift away from the intensity of living stories with participants to retelling stories through research texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 129). Having said this, I shared my narrative account with my participant one final time (May 14, 2011) to ensure that a negotiation of the text took place through member-checking.

At this point, I began to explore the meaning and significance of my field texts through an interpretive-analytic lens, which came specifically from Clandinin and Connelly’s ‘commonplaces’ (2000). I unpacked my experiences using the commonplaces and I have unpacked the field texts using the same process. This transitional time from field texts to research texts is a time marked by tension and uncertainty for narrative inquirers. Careful reading and rereading of field texts is necessary and the concept of the commonplaces must be kept in mind. At this point, narrative inquirers begin to ‘narratively code’ their field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131). This process led into many questions of meaning and social significance while I attempted to intertwine the moments of narrative and experience that were shared in the field texts. The hope is that the complexities of Ahmad’s experiences were explored in the narrative account so that they remain true to him. Therefore, the researcher must be mindful of their voice and signature during this process to ensure that the voice of the participant is not drowned out (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 146-149).

3.3 Ethical Considerations

In my study, my participant is of a different culture from the majority Turkish population. Thus, a pseudonym, Ahmad, has been used to ensure that the participant’s true identity in the research texts was concealed and confidentiality is safeguarded. Furthermore, additional steps were taken to conceal the participant’s identity by omitting select information from field texts that could potentially revealed who the participant truly is. Additionally, an informed consent form was used to ensure that the participant understood the processes and his rights for the duration of the research. Overall, every precaution was taken to ensure that all parties involved in the research, namely the participant, had favorable experiences. Lastly, an interpretive process occurred between researcher and participant to promote member checking and negotiation of field

texts. In the spirit of this interpretive process, the participant's true voice and concerns were honored. Through the use of an informed consent form and in the spirit of confidentiality and anonymity, my research aimed to honor the participant and his rights. By building on this as an ethical platform, both the researcher and the participant hope to reciprocally gain through their research relationship (Duncan & Watson, 2010, p. 57).

3.4 Significance of the Study

My research puzzle began when I noticed that in the Turkish-majority classrooms at Doğan University¹, the odd foreign student stuck out from the crowd. I began to wonder why these students stood out so much and began asking myself questions about whether I, as their teacher, or the institution and its curriculum were meeting their needs. This led me into asking the following questions: What are the stories of foreign students at an English-medium university in Turkey? And how do their stories shape their understanding of their experiences in this context?

These questions led to a series of informal conversations with foreign students at the university where I inquired about their lives at Doğan University and in Turkey generally. Their answers astonished and intrigued me. Moreover, I discovered that their lived stories and their experiences in Turkey are dynamic and complex. Things like cultural expectations and perceptions of education, to name a few, demonstrated that foreign students needs, wants, learning preferences, and so forth might be very different from the dominant Turkish population. Furthermore, I began to wonder about the Turkish educational system as a whole and if it considered the needs of these students.

What I quickly discovered was that very little research was being done on foreign university students experiences around the world but, more importantly, I could find no such research here in Turkey. Additionally, very little work in NI was being done on this topic and, after doing a thorough search, I discovered that almost no work on NI was happening in Turkey. With these considerations in mind, the significance of conducting research on my topic became more apparent. Firstly, I believe that it is important to give students, like Ahmad, a voice. Their lives, experiences, and stories are unique and insightful in many ways and it is my hope that I was able to accurately reflect Ahmad's experiences in Turkey. Secondly, I believe that this study can help to inform educational institutions like Doğan University that are receiving more and more interest from outside of Turkey. This is especially true for an institution like Doğan University that is gaining a

¹ Doğan University is a pseudonym for an English-medium University in Turkey.

reputation and influence in the world as is evident by its recent ranking on the Times Higher Education World University Ranking (Times Higher Education's 2010-2011 World University Rankings, 2010). These kinds of institutions will need to better understand the needs of foreign students. Thirdly, there is currently no form of cultural education built into the curriculum and I wonder if this is something that may need to change in the future. In Europe, for instance, almost all countries have a form of cultural education built into the curriculum to promote cultural understandings and partnerships within Europe. With additional foreigners entering Turkish universities and Turkey generally, a deeper understanding of *culture* should be promoted in education. Lastly, NI has not yet found a strong community in Turkey. Narrative Inquiry research done by Dr. Jennifer Mitton-Kükner (Mitton-Kükner, Nelson, & Desrochers, 2010) is the only research I could find carried out in Turkey. I hope that by using NI, I can help to promote its use and the NI community.

3.5 Limitations

In terms of limitations, only one research participant was used. Ideally, this kind of research should be carried out with several participants over a longer period of time. Unfortunately, there is simply not enough time due to the constraints of my MA program to look into more than one experience. I am hopeful that a possible follow-up looking at foreign-students in a Japanese setting may be a possibility. Moreover, I have looked through one cultural lens for the research; that of my research participant. There are, however, several different cultural groups that make up the foreign student body that are not represented. Another limitation of the study stems from the lack of generalizable results.

IV. Narrative Account: Life Bumping up Against Ahmad

Ahmad entered Doğan University in Ankara, Turkey for the first time in January 2008 for a four-month initiation program. This invitation came from the head of the university and was meant to be an opportunity for the students to get acquainted to the university, Turkey, and speaking English. Ahmad had never left his home country before this point and was deeply connected to his family, his community and his culture. Being the son of conservative parents and originating from the middle East, his exposure to new ideas and new ways of thinking was limited to the small community he grew-up in and he yearned for a new experience.

“It came to my mind that I want my MA and I tried in [my home country] big time to get my MA. I didn't get and I want it so I said its very good

[opportunity to come to Doğan University] and I can come to another country maybe another thing I imagine myself like, a fun time and with my MA degree it was very good. And I was bored and, you know, I wanted to travel to another place and I worked very hard from morning to night and I wanted to go studying" (Conversation transcript, October 28/10)

A very unique opportunity to leave his home country to pursue an MA presented Ahmad and this was something that he craved for. For Ahmad, the opportunity to come to Turkey was an opportunity to leave his home, his family, and his community for something exciting and different. However, this opportunity to study abroad did not come easily and Ahmad had to work long hours. He was also ambitious to continue his studies at the Masters level and all of these contributed to his desire for something new.

Before his experiences in Turkey, Ahmad had never seen mountains and forests, he had never been a student in a mixed gender class, and he had never been away from his family and friends for longer than a couple of weeks. When I asked Ahmad, in our first audio-recorded interview, what his first impressions were of Doğan University, he replied by saying, "The first time... it was very, very beautiful. The first... One day, I forgot [I got lost]" (Conversation transcript, October 28/10). He proceeded to tell me a short story about how, on his first day in Ankara, he got lost and could not find his way back to the university. He admitted to me that getting lost that first day was for him, "I think, ...it is [a] very, very big [issue]. And now I think it is [was] very small [issue] because I [have] experienced the 3 years here, maybe" (Conversation transcript, October 28/10). It appears as though Ahmad very quickly fulfilled his desire for something new and exciting during his first days in Turkey but over time, as a student in new university environment, it was not always easy to find his way. These new experiences provided a plethora of new challenges, and, ultimately, very new experiences that were hard for Ahmad to understand at times.

Ahmad's time in Turkey appears to have had many bumps along the way that he had to often figure out by himself. As I got to know Ahmad over the course of the study from September 2010 to March 2011, I began to realize that getting lost along the way appears to be a reoccurring theme in Ahmad's experiences as a foreign student in a Turkish university. Ahmad was not just getting lost in the physical sense but he seemed to also have a difficult time wading his way through the educational system as well as an unfamiliar new culture. These new experiences fulfilled Ahmad's desire for excitement; however, the road has been difficult and fraught with moments of being lost. The following narrative account inquiries into moments that happened during Ahmad's university experience in

Turkey. These moments will be explored through the NI common places of “temporality, sociality, and place – which specify dimensions of an inquiry space” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) in order to better understand the University experiences of a foreign student in Turkey.

4.1 Exploring the Concept of ‘Getting Lost’

Considering this idea of becoming lost in relation to Ahmad’s situation, his story of getting lost on his first day in Turkey is a powerful metaphor of his time in Turkey. He admitted that being lost his first days at Doğan University was a “very, very big [issue]” (Conversation transcript, October 28/10) but that later it was not an issue any more. Ahmad seems to have orientated himself to his new environment, and after spending several years at the university, getting physically lost was no longer an issue. However, elements of disorientation continue to appear in the stories he told as he navigated an educational system and culture he was unfamiliar with. Although Doğan University is no longer physically new to him, the cultural and educational landscapes continue to present challenges where he often struggles to find his way and orientate himself within these complexities. Therefore, this concept of ‘being lost’ will be an ongoing thread that will help to illuminate Ahmad’s experiences in Turkey.

4.2 First Impressions of Ahmad

My first written impressions of Ahmad were, and still are, true to the person that I have come to know closely over the research project: ‘He is so open-minded and incredibly modest’ (Field Notes, April 19/10). I am equally impressed by his maturity and experience. “I immediately respected him also because he was clearly older and much more mature than his classmates and always seemed to have an honest and genuine way about him” (Reconstructed memory, March 3/11). When I first had Ahmad as a student in my class during the fall 2009 semester, I wanted to meet up with him outside the context of our university to learn more about his experience. We discussed many things that day and I remember thinking that Ahmad’s story of his life, of his tensions, of his fascinating realizations and perspectives in this new foreign university context may have been lost if no one wrote it down. At the time, I wondered about how the current system at Doğan University incorporated foreign students into university life. Furthermore, I wondered if there was any kind of support mechanisms in the university for students in similar situations. At the time, before I began this inquiry, I had assumed that there must have been support in place for these students, that is, to help guide them through a largely Turkish focused university education.

Our relationship before that first meeting outside of school revolved around our roles as teacher and student. Unlike the majority of the students I had worked with at the time, I knew that he was not your typical student as he was older than his classmates. This was most apparent in the way that he carried himself compared to his fellow classmates that were typically right out of high school. He was observant when others seemed to miss the point. I remember one instance where I was running a classroom conversation and students were discussing a choice between two options. Everyone unmistakably picked a side but Ahmad was reflective and spoke about how his decision would depend on different contexts and circumstances. His input took the classroom conversation out of the simplicity of a two-sided decision into a more in-depth conversation. His insight pushed and challenged others in the classroom (Reconstructed memory, March 20/11). Although I do not remember all of the details of the conversation, I do remember that we had a lively discussion after Ahmad's input.

Our first in-depth conversation outside of school (at a local Starbucks) allowed for a moment unburdened by our traditional roles at the university and I was privy to his stories of growing up in the Middle East. I am always reflective about how a place can shape a person's interactions with other people. Outside of the university context, I was able to engage Ahmad as a fellow master's student and as a friend. Within the school context, I needed to fulfill my role as his instructor hampering the openness we mutually shared that day outside of our usual roles as student-teacher. I remember being filled with wonderment as he relayed the challenges of going to school in an English-medium university context in Turkey, a place very different culturally from the place he grew up. This is why I wanted to engage Ahmad in this research project and was very grateful for his participation.

4.3 Ahmad's First Experiences at a Turkish University

During the interview process that began in September 2010 through to April 2011, Ahmad continued to struggle with "the question mark" (Conversation transcript, Jan 1/11), as he called it, of what his future would be like after completing his Masters degree and returning to his own country. This concept first appeared after I asked him about his future plans upon completion of his studies at Doğan University. "At first they won't [did not accept my MA degree] and they [The government in his home country] want to know what subject you got the MA and then they will accept it but we don't know what will happen in two years. I hope they let me teach Biology" (Conversation transcript, October 28/10). For me, as a researcher, this sticks out as one of the most interesting moments in our time together. More specifically, Ahmad talked a lot about the uncertainty about his

future upon completion of his graduate degree. Ahmad came to Doğan University on a full scholarship to take a Masters degree in Biology. However, it was his understanding that the university changed his degree to focus on education in Biology instead of just Biology. Furthermore, he also seemed to be confused by the complete removal of the thesis section from his MA². This thesis, according to Ahmad, is what the government of his country expects of a Biology student. This particular point has been the cause of a lot of Ahmad's frustration and confusion about his future in his home country.

“When we [The other students in the same program as Ahmad] come here we [were] faced a very difficult thing in here. And they become frustrated of course because every people every student come here to get their branches [own subject degrees] and they become changed to teaching and education [MA Degree]. And this thing becomes more struggle for us” (Conversation transcript, Jan 1/11)

When I look back on my initial impressions of this moment, I was in disbelief and remember searching his words carefully for when or where I misunderstood him. I came to wonder about why the university had changed Ahmad's and his friends' MA degrees or if this was a possibly misunderstanding on the part of Ahmad. I also wondered why these students were not given a voice in the decision if, in fact, the university had made this change without their input or understanding (Reconstructed memory, March 3/11). Right after the interview on Jan 1, 2011, I wrote, “He [Ahmad] is not doing what he thought he would be doing. He [seems to] almost feels deceived by the program because it is not really what he wanted and it was changed after he arrived” (Field notes, Oct.28/10). Furthermore, I was reflective about how lost I would feel in Ahmad's place. I also wondered about why the university decided to do this (if this was true), whether Ahmad was properly informed about the decision, or had he misunderstood the situation? There appears to be many ‘question marks’ in my own head alongside Ahmad's about what was going on in this situation. As the interview progressed, the tensions in his story deepened when I learned that this program change may jeopardize the opportunities he will have in his home country when he returns. When I asked him in the interview if he will be accepted as a Biology teacher when he returns, he answered bluntly, “No, of course not. This is a problem. I don't know my fate in [home country]. This is a debatable argument. I don't know if they

² During our final interview, Ahmad informed me that the university has now agreed to grant him a thesis. However, there seems to be some confusion as to how long the thesis is required to be and who will supervise it (Field note, May 14/11).

accept my masters or reject it” (Conversation transcript, October 28/10). Looking back at Ahmad’s life before his arrival to Doğan University, he explained to me that he was already working as a professional in his chosen field and was satisfied with the experience he had gained working in a biology laboratory. When he spoke about his time in the laboratory, I got the sense that he was very proud of the work he had been involved in (Field notes, Oct.28/10):

“I want to mention something before this. I am [an] official man. I have two years [of work experience]. The government [will] give me two years to finish my masters and I was an assistant teacher in a technical institution. Yes, I started in 2008. Just in 2000 I came here [his biology lab in his home country] and just for 5-8 months I work in a laboratory. I was a teacher in a laboratory about the blood about virus and then I heard about this program and I came here [to Turkey]. I want to work in [my home country again in the future], I hope, and I hope in my place, in my institution [the same biology laboratory]. The same institution if they give me permission of course. I am now a graduate with a bachelors [degree]. If they accept my MA then I become a teacher in Biology and then I choose my own subject. Maybe new but in [my home country] they don’t like this type. At first they won’t and they want to know what subject you got the MA and then they will accept it but we don’t know what will happen in two years. I hope they let me teach Biology” (Conversation transcript, October 28/10)

As is clear from the transcript excerpt, Ahmad had a lot invested in the work he did in his home country. When I look deeper at his history and his hopes to go back to his home country, we see many tensions arising to the surface of his stories. Ahmad had jumped at the opportunity to further his career by doing a Masters degree in Biology at Doğan University but did not fully understand the time and sacrifice his family at home needed to make in order for him to fulfill this dream.

“And then I become like, oh my god, that changed our topics [focus area for the MA]. Difficult. Imagine if you first you, says to you that you be get your subject. Your department, your specific things and then changes it like switch like 180 degree and then I become frustrated. First, I decided if I continue with the masters or I just leave. I have a difficult time about this a lot. It takes me some months and at the end I decided not [to quit] because of me but for my mom, my family, my parents. Because a lot of cost I spend coming from my country and I decided to continue whether I liked it or not” (Conversation transcript, October 28/10)

At this point of the interview, I wrote down the following in my field notes: “This made me think about how selfish so many people are including me. I want to pursue something that I’m interested in but I realize that not everyone has this freedom to choose” (Field note, October 28/10). Ahmad’s story seemed to have hit a tender note for me because if I was in his place, I may have dropped out of the program and pursued my master’s degree elsewhere. However, it is clear that Ahmad had more than himself to consider in this decision; he also needed to consider his family who had taken on the financial burden for him being away from home. Adding further complexities to the situation was the fact that Ahmad had to pass through the university English preparatory program in order to move on to his 2-year graduate degree. Not only did this add more years to what he thought would only be 2 years away from home but it also provided for new and unexpected challenges³. I asked him about his first memories of the university English preparatory school and this is what he told me:

“I remember something like [this]. Opening... Something comes from my mind [as being] strenuous. How they teach [at the English Preparatory School] because the teaching was very different. I didn’t get this before [in my home country]. The exam. We attend to the exam to define the levels [put in the appropriate level of English at the preparatory school]. I first feel this kind of exam [It was my first time with this kind of exam]. Before I didn’t experience this. The experience of time was effectively managed. I because in [my home country], you have a lot of time, sometimes 3 questions, 2 hours. There I had plenty of time. Every question was 1 minute [at the preparatory school]. I couldn’t manage my time. The time finished and I had 100 questions that [I] didn’t finished. Really! The first time I attempt this type of examination. I was surprised at how time was gone. Turkish students know this type of examination. I never experienced this sort of exam” (Conversation transcript, October 28/10)

As a teacher at Doğan University, I know firsthand how much emphasis is placed on the assessment of learners. In fact, the assessment on high-stakes exams makes up almost 90 percent of a student’s overall marks in the English preparatory school. Therefore, it is important to be familiar with the exam formats and their expectations in order to be successful as a student. For instance, a typical exam is made up of multiple-choice questions, short answer and often a

³ In our final interview together, Ahmad informed me that the man who recruited him in his home country had told him that he would go directly into his degree. Furthermore, he had no idea that he would have to take an English preparatory course in advance (Field note, May 14/11).

longer written essay component. Each section is strictly timed and varies in difficulty at each language level. Turkish students are very familiar with the exam format as it is often used in other qualifying exams in the national school system. Ahmad, on the other hand, had never before seen an exam like this. I was surprised to learn that exams in his home country did not have the time constraints and pressure that the English preparatory school has. I could not imagine having hours to answer a few questions and then being forced to take an exam that has you answer many questions in under an hour. Later, I asked Ahmad more about his experience and he told me, "I remember there were 214 questions and I just finished 100 questions. And the time was gone. And the first time was circle the question [Filling in the Optic Form bubbles] and I never experienced that" (Conversation transcript, October 28/10). When I prompted him to explain what he meant by 'circle the question,' he described to me the Scantron, or optic form, sheet that he needed to use in order to answer the questions. In other words, it was not just his lack of time but also his unfamiliarity with bubbling in his answers on a separate sheet of paper (for item analysis). Prior to this exam, this was simply something he had no experience with. From the perspective of being lost, Ahmad was familiar with exams, as he had taken many in his home country. However, this new exam format presented an unfamiliar landscape for Ahmad, one in which he was forced to learn very quickly otherwise he would not succeed.

Ahmad spent an extra two years at the preparatory school so that he could reach a sufficient English level in order to go on and do his Masters at great expense to his family at home. Even though Ahmad was not paying tuition because he was a scholarship student, his family needed to support him in terms of other living costs. "Because a lot of cost [University costs] I [his family] spend coming from my country and I decided to continue whether I liked it or not" (Conversation transcript, October 28/10). Furthermore, I got the impression that he was a bit resentful of the fact that he had to spend an extra two years learning English through the preparatory school because, as he reflected back on why he came to Turkey, he told me the following:

"And I got the results and I got the scholarship to come [to the preparatory school]. I could not pay this money [afford the tuition fees]. I can say this very clearly. Because I cannot burden this price (its very expensive). If I pay this money I didn't choose to teach [get a Educational Masters degree]. Maybe then [I would go to a] British or Canadian university. Or another place more better in my imagination. It is more better education there than [at Doğan University]. I think this totally because my English becomes more and more good and I can speak like semi-native. And like previous year I cannot speak

fluently. I cannot express my English like I wanted. I said two year [that I spent at the preparatory school]. I imagine if I two years in another native country maybe I improve twice or maybe more than twice. When we [my classmates and I] leave English [preparatory school], step by step [over time], maybe down [my English has become worse]. I was. When I was in [the preparatory school], everybody follow English Universities or study [English] but a Masters is different [because you do not need to study English as much]” (Conversation transcript, October 28/10)

Attending to Ahmad’s feelings above, it is clear that he still struggles with his English and although he remains a scholarship student, the extra years away from home are both a financial and emotional burden on him and his family. We can also see from Ahmad’s words that there is frustration with the circumstances that he is currently in. Even though the scholarship is very helpful to him, he wonders what his situation would look like if he decided to go on and finish his master’s degree (in Biology) in an English speaking country. Furthermore, his frustration of staying at the preparatory school for an extra two years becomes more lucid. Ahmad clearly struggles with his use of English, as is evident in the conversation transcripts, and he wonders about how he could have better spent those two years. In terms of being lost, he thought the terrain, for two years of his life, to be clearly mapped out before his arrival to Doğan University. However, the terrain became much more complex with the introduction of the preparatory school. Therefore, in order to familiarize himself with this new terrain, he was forced to wander into unfamiliar territory.

4.4 Ahmad’s Tensions in Returning Home

Ahmad had a very good job in his home country that gave him great pleasure because he loved biology and had a passion for it. The opportunity at Doğan University presented him with a master’s degree on full scholarship and the means to continue doing Biology at a more qualified level in his home country. Of course, he understood that his degree would be in Biology and would include a thesis but somewhere along the road, this thesis seems to have systematically fallen by the way side. I knew of his passion and dedication to biology going into this research project because I had Ahmad as a student during two separate 8-week English preparatory school courses in the fall of 2009. I was teaching at the preparatory school and was one of the first foreign teachers (most teachers are local staff) that he had come into contact with. I specifically remember being captivated by his understanding of biology when he made a presentation to the

class. The presentations were supposed to demonstrate something that the students were interested in.

I remember specifically him presenting something to the class and he decided to make it like a biology lesson... He was clearly very knowledgeable and I was very interested to know more. That is where I learned of his interest in and passion for Biology. In class, I can remember him speaking with confidence on some biology concept. I also remember that the rest of the class was glued to his words because he carried an air of maturity and authority that no one else in the class could match (reconstructed memory, March 3/11)

When Ahmad first arrived in Turkey, he believed that he could return to his previous work in his biology laboratory because the government in his home country had given him a two-year leave to pursue a master's degree. This must have given him a great sense of security before he came to Turkey. However, if I look at the end of our first audio-recorded interview together, I wrote, "I sensed a feeling of nervousness and anticipation [from Ahmad] about going home. There seems to be a lot of unknowns for him and his future in his home country" (field notes, Oct.28/10). Consequently, he would be leaving Turkey when he finished his studies with a degree in education and not biology⁴. Moreover, his degree may not be acknowledged when he returns because it has no thesis component.

"If I don't have a thesis...then certainly they [Government in home country] don't accept the masters. Because they are still no curriculum or certain rule about without thesis statement in [my home country]. The idea of teaching education is not familiar in [my home country]. Maybe I search in all countries too. Maybe it's a modern, I think, Masters, I don't know. They [Government in home country] are just traditional curriculum dominant, not modern. I don't know" (Conversation transcript, October 28/10)

During the interview, it was obvious to me that the academic world he had come from and the academic world he was situated in, in Turkey, were exceedingly disparate. Where Doğan University had adopted a more western outlook on educational practices and curriculum, his home country still existed largely

⁴ In our final interview, Ahmad expressed some excitement about the possibility of blending his knowledge of education with biology when he returned home, which shows that his attitude towards his education masters degree has become more optimistic (field note, May 14/11).

outside this system. When I prompted Ahmad to explain how the systems are different, he told me the following:

“yes, [it can be] political and like you know someone [in your field] and they help you. It’s a political decision. Someone deserve [the job because they have the qualifications] and they don’t get job and someone who don’t deserve gets job. And I hope I deserve it, maybe. I will apply [in my home country for a job] and will try and know someone and say to him, please you know my qualifications and you make me [give me] the position I want. And at the same time I deserve [the position] and I will do this to get the job. I have to do this. This is my idea, maybe in two years it [will] changes. Maybe I’m wrong and maybe some [person from my home country] will call me, how you speak this, I am, maybe, they will notice me. My institution may not be the same. It is the people who are intelligent people or politics” (Conversation transcript, October 28/10)

According to Ahmad, the system of finding a job in his home country is not always solely based on qualifications and experience. Ahmad knows the landscape in his own country well and understands that getting a job may not just be about qualifications. Furthermore, there seems to be some conflict in his words about how to negotiate this system when he returns home. As the system currently is, getting a job appears to be just as much about who you know than what you know. Later in the conversation, I told Ahmad that politics can sometimes play a role in my home country as well but he was quick to explain that things are not always legal in his country and that he hopes for change. Ahmad appears to be in a very precarious position because he is doing a degree that he did not come here to do and does not yet know if the time he is putting in will pay off when he returns home. The sense of being lost begins to fill in the spaces between his words. Ahmad does not feel as though he is in control over what is happening to him in Turkey and how that situation came about is a bit of a mystery.

4.5 Relationships with Teachers and Peers

I spent a lot of time reflecting on how Ahmad was navigating the Turkish university system at Doğan University so I was curious about his relationships with his classmates and teachers. Certainly these relationships were key to his success in the master’s program. During our January 1st, 2011 interview I asked Ahmad about his relationship with his teachers. At first he went through different teachers at the university and explained to me that generally, ‘...there [are] no problems. I respect them and they respect me” (Conversation transcript, January

1/11). However, I pushed a bit harder by asking him how he communicated his problems when they came up. This conversation was very different.

“Maybe I don’t know what to think [about] this. Maybe it’s not good for me. I think that the things [problems] belong to me, If I want to communicate more I tried to be closer to the teachers and talk with them but I have a problem [with communicating with them]. Sometimes I don’t tell when I have a problem. I cannot tell. I keep in myself and I solve by myself. I struggle and I frustrated and it takes more time to solve this problem. But I have not faced large problems. If I have a big problem then, maybe, I consult with the teacher” (Conversation transcript, January 1/11)

At this point in the interview I began to realize just how difficult it was for him to communicate his problems to his instructors, whether they are English or Turkish speakers. Neither language is his mother-tongue⁵ nor the teachers may not be able to appreciate his unique circumstances as a Middle-Eastern student in Turkey (There are currently no teachers in his program from his home country). I also thought it was interesting that he said he solved his problems on his own. Going back to some of my past considerations, I wondered what kind of support he had access to or if he even had any support mechanisms at the university to help him navigate issues with his instructors. I prompted Ahmad further by asking about cultural differences and if these also caused some communication problems. Here, I believe, it becomes obvious how hard it has been for Ahmad to orient himself within the university.

“Of course, I think. Culture has a role. Some people have no idea about another culture...Sometimes they don’t think like you and sometimes you don’t think like opposite person [person of a different culture]. But I think, with time, if I want to be a communicate person then, I must sit or meet 1,2,3,4,5 times to become closer to each other [to the teacher]. I know my mistake but sometimes you are very busy. You have not time to communicate outside the class, I mean. I want to meet the teacher outside the class. I want to arrange this... I want really. [However] From the morning to the night to [I am busy with] work at the school. We have lesson. And they take me too long time just to receive education. Not to be talk to friends too much [I don’t even

⁵ In our final interview, Ahmad informed me that he actually speaks about five languages including Turkish and English. This has also contributed to the difficulties of learning these new languages because he has had a hard time separating the languages (field note, May 14/11).

have time to talk with friends]. And we have a lesson [with our] friends, all friends together, and a 10 minute break to drink some coffee and the communication become little bit. Too busy [we are too busy to communicate with friends even on breaks]” (Conversation transcript, January 1/11)

From Ahmad’s words, it is clear that he understands how difficult it is to communicate with someone from a different culture. This stems from his personal experiences with his teachers and classmates at Doğan University. Bridging the cultural differences is difficult in a new culture. Moreover, Ahmad acknowledges the hard work it takes to overcome these difficulties. Having to meet with someone several times to communicate something simple is time consuming, not to mention takes a lot of patience. On top of these challenges, someone like Ahmad struggled to perform adequately at school having to hand in all of his work in his acquired language of English. Ultimately, he struggled to have time for himself and his friends let alone communicate and make the effort to bridge the cultural gap with his teachers. It must be difficult for Ahmad to figure out how to best spend his time based on the pressures he faces from his family at home to succeed. And success, for Ahmad, was to get through his program quickly so that he could restart his life in his home country again. It must have been difficult for him to choose which path would lead him in the right direction.

Another difficulty that Ahmad faced was that the majority of the Doğan University teachers and students are native Turkish teachers and, although there are many similarities between his own Middle-Eastern culture and that of Turkey, communication issues were still apparent. Ahmad has admitted to me, on more than one occasion, that his Turkish is good but not by any means fluent and he still runs into trouble communicating his needs. In addition, according to Ahmad, there seems to be a strange dynamic at play between many of his Turkish teachers and classmates and their perceptions of people from other Middle Eastern countries. When I pushed Ahmad about why his relationships with his Turkish classmates were difficult, besides the time it took to bridge the cultural gap, he expressed his feelings about how his culture was perceived generally in Turkey. This was a moment that bewildered me because it was something that I, as a foreigner, had contemplated but had never verbalized.

“Maybe they [Turkish people] give importance to one another, [and] European people. I think, I can say this. Maybe people from foreign people [countries like] from Canada, England. They give important [to these people]. If you have [come from] [my home country], [compared to] Europe and Turkey. They [Turkish people] see they [Turkish people] are more developed than [my home

country]... this is right [This is true]. And they [Turkish people] see themselves... they [Turkish people] see themselves as more inferior than [compared to] European country. I see from their conversation like this. When someone comes from Europe they see them as more superior. Of course this [European Countries] is more developed than Turkey. And they [Turkish people] give importance to higher [developed countries] and they forget others [less developed countries]. In their imagination. I never feel that I am inferior. They insult themselves if they think like this. Their education people think like this and there is no education, how can they thought [think like this]. If I talk about this there is a lot of branches [things to say] and I don't want to talk like this" (Conversation transcript, January 1/11)

What Ahmad expressed is a powerful but veiled perception about his understanding of Turkish identity and culture. His words unmistakably show his feelings, that is, the way he has been treated, as a person from a Middle-Eastern country, is different from the way that someone from a developed country, like me, would be treated. Ahmad is aware that what he is saying is controversial because towards the end of his words, I felt him pulling back and refraining from saying more. Like Ahmad, I have often thought about whether this is true or not and it has been on my mind several times in my conversations with him. As a Canadian from a developed country, I have been treated very well in Turkey and have often wondered about why there are so many discrepancies between my experience as a student and Ahmad's. I, unlike Ahmad, have always felt like I was in control of my educational experience in Turkey and understood what path I was taking. Ahmad, on the other hand, has had a tension filled experience that has gotten him perpetually lost. Ahmad is upfront with his frustrations about how he believes he has been treated as a person from a less-developed Middle Eastern country. I wonder if this is something that others also struggle with as students from less-developed places within the context of Turkey.

Another interesting point is Ahmad's declaration that "I never feel that I am inferior" (Conversation transcript, January 1/11). Ahmad has always expressed his admiration and love for his country even though, he acknowledges, it is sometimes a difficult place to live. I think Ahmad feels like many of the negative impressions that his Turkish teachers and classmates have are not justified. To him, he sees this lack of understanding about his culture as a problem of unfamiliarity, not necessarily ignorance. Latter, Ahmad concedes that not everyone in Turkey holds these perceptions. Moreover, he admitted later in the interview that he may be feeling this way because everyone around him is currently just too busy. He actually back-peddles a bit and admits that he did not feel this strongly when he

was in the preparatory school. Here is where we see Ahmad's maturity and his ability to reflect upon his own ideas come through strongly in his words.

"[The preparatory school was] a little bit [different] but here [in my MA] I feel isolated. Maybe here they [Turkish classmates] are very busy and they concentrate on their masters and they forget about all things. And its very frustrating [for me]. [People being busy] Make people loose their minds. Because before [when] I say something [about how Turkish people perceive others]... its very hard see [I may have misunderstood]? I cannot accuse them... maybe they are very busy. Maybe they don't care about themselves and cannot hang out [with] themselves because of the strict curriculum" (Conversation transcript, January 1/11)

Here we see Ahmad reflective of his frustrations and wondering about his own words. Maybe the way he feels that he has been marginalized by being from a Middle-Eastern country is simply just the stresses and busy student lives of his Turkish classmates. Furthermore, it is interesting that he reflects upon the lack of time his classmates may have for themselves. Earlier, Ahmad was reflective about his own lack of time in not being able to bridge the cultural gap with his teachers. Consequently, Ahmad appears to have come to the realization that his classmates may not have the time to bridge the cultural gap with him because they are also too busy to do this. One of the last things that we talked about in the January 1st, 2011 interview was about the differences he found between the people in his home country and the people of Turkey. I'm not sure what I had expected but his answers again surprised me.

"I think the first of all thing is the relationship with...girl[s]. We [as people from my country] are not familiar with this [open relationships with women]. We cannot talk anything with a girl [openly] and Turkish boys are familiar with this [Turkish men can talk to women easily]. We never talk with [a] girl like this in our country. I'm not a person that [has] like hung out with a girl [in the past]. Any people want like this but the culture teach us like this [to not have open relationships with women]. And still now I struggle [in Turkey]. Maybe I like girl but when the situation becomes serious I want to pick up a girl [ask her out on a date]... maybe I stop. Because I seek some moral things related to my religion and my family. Maybe I want it but I cannot do. Do you understand me? And become like this I don't drinking [drink alcohol] and this become isolated me [makes me isolated from others in Turkey]" (Conversation transcript, January 1/11)

Ahmad mentions two things that seem to alienate him in Turkish society: his inability to feel comfortable talking to women openly and his hesitation to drink alcohol. As a quick aside, Turkey is a very dynamic country and the cultural norms for both these things differ dramatically across the country. Generally speaking, universities in Turkey are more liberalized places where interacting with women and drinking alcohol are not necessarily taboo subjects. Doğan University is located in an area where all students regardless of background will most likely come into contact with both drinking and interactions with the opposite sex. Having said that, Ahmad finds himself in another place of tension in relation to these two topics, especially when communicating with his fellow peers. Many of his classmates' social lives take place in bars and cafes where both alcohol and interactions with the opposite sex are common occurrences. For Ahmad, coming from a much stricter cultural upbringing, these common happenings are anything but common for him. Moreover, his attempts to bridge this cultural gap with his Turkish peers and participate in such activities seem to bump up with his moral and social values. Bending his moral and social values is simply something that Ahmad is not willing or comfortable to do. I commented during the interview about how difficult and 'shocking' it must have been to come to Turkey based on these ingrained and socialized values. Ahmad paused for a moment thoughtfully and said the following:

“Maybe if I come here [to Turkey] 10 -15 year before, maybe I changed easy [I could change my values easily]. For some things. Because if you have [if you are] a teenager, you can easily change. But if you become 25 or 28 years [old], it is difficult things because your think about your future [How you want to live in your future]. It is not a problem for me. I don't find this a problem but I read about them if you have 25 [and you are exposed to different cultural values], it [will] becomes strange in your culture...” (Conversation transcript, January 1/11)

Ahmad recognizes that the culture you are exposed to at a young age has a profound impact on your values throughout your life. Furthermore, I think, he is trying to say that as an adult (someone between the ages of 25-28), it is much harder for him to change the values that he grew up with. Having said this, he goes on to say that he does not see these values as a problem for himself as an adult. As a confident young man, I can see how he is proud of those values but I often wondered about how much those values contributed to many of the tensions he experienced in Turkey (Field notes, January 1/11). Furthermore, having a different set of values compared to those of the majority of Turkish people he came

in contact with at Doğan University was evidently confusing and frustrating at times. Attempting to navigate his way through these relationships with different people surely contributed to situations in which he felt lost. This becomes even more revealing when considering that Ahmad has very few other people to share his values and help guide him in Turkey. Moreover, the fact that he is older than many of his classmates must contribute to this feeling of being lost. Overall, the relationships that Ahmad has had in Turkey with his teachers and peers seem to have also contributed to the disorientation he experienced.

4.6 Ahmad's Future Considerations

What does Ahmad's future life look like and how much of an impact will his experiences in Turkey shape that future? These questions are at the forefront of my thinking after inquiring into Ahmad's insightful and tension-filled experiences of getting lost in Turkey. Ahmad's future seems to be embodied in what he called, "The question mark" (Conversation transcript, Jan 1/11). Both his near future, returning back to his home country, and his distant future still hold a lot of uncertainty for him. Tensions surrounding his MA including the exclusion of a thesis as well as the change in focus from that of Biology to Education, seemed to have jeopardized Ahmad's future plans. Despite this fact, Ahmad appeared very positive about who he was and where he was going at the end of the interview process. When I asked Ahmad about what he thought were the most positive and negative things about Turkey, his answer was informative. In fact, he disregarded my question and answered it in his own way. "I every time say that I get something good [from my experiences in Turkey] but I conserve my own nationality as a [person from my own country] because if you lose this, you lost [lose] your nationality, you lost [lose] your own identity" (Conversation transcript, January 1/11). I believe that what Ahmad was trying to say was that, regardless of the hardships and challenges he faced, it was important for him to understand these experiences through his own cultural lens. I am hopeful that he will be able to use what he has learned in his own country. After the interview, during a small informal discussion, Ahmad seemed very confident and excited about going home and saw his experiences in Turkey, and his MA degree, as worthwhile endeavors as demonstrated in my following field note.

'He recently returned [from his home country for a visit] and is confident that the last group who graduated [from Doğan University] have gotten their degrees recognized in [his home country]. Although there is still many question marks in his mind, he seems more confident that his degree will not be in vain' (Field notes, February 19/11)

Furthermore, in our final meeting to review my narrative account on May 14th, 2011, Ahmad spoke confidently about getting his old job back at the Biology laboratory that he had worked for with great interest before he came to Turkey. This made him very happy (field note, May 14/11). Though, he did make a point to talk about his fellow students from his home country that may not be so lucky as to have jobs lined up when they returned home. Ahmad then took the time to remind me that their degrees were also changed and that the “question mark” in their future plans plays an additionally unnerving role (field note, May 14/11)

V. Implications: Seeing Big and Seeing Small

In order to help connect Ahmad's stories with their implications to higher educational contexts within Turkey and Europe, I will use Maxine Green's concept of 'seeing big and seeing small' (1995, pp. 9). Green has used this concept as a tool for analyzing contemporary educational realities from different perspectives. Furthermore, this tool is used by her as a way to “cultivate multiple ways of seeing and multiple dialogues in a world where nothing stays the same” (1995, p. 16). Briefly, seeing big is to look closely at a person's experience. On the other hand, seeing small is when one pulls back away from an individual and sees many people and their collective needs. Her concept encourages readers to 'shift perspective and modes of thinking' so as to bring people and things into different and often informative viewpoints. In seeing big,

“one must resist viewing other human beings as mere objects or chess pieces and view them in their integrity and particularity instead. One must see from the point of view of the participant in the midst of what is happening if one is to be privy to the plans people make, the initiatives they make, the uncertainties they face” (Green, p. 10)

In terms of this research project, I have largely spent my time 'seeing big' as I inquired into Ahmad's experiences here in Turkey. This account focused directly on Ahmad within the midst of his decisions, tensions, and interactions through the lens of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) common places of temporality, sociality, and place. Through this research, Ahmad's life as a foreign student in Turkey and his tension-filled experiences were brought to the surface. Ahmad's narrative is one filled with being lost within the educational experience, within the cultural landscape, and within the interactions with his classmates and teachers. His experiences are important because they shed light on what a foreign student may experience when they decide to go abroad to study for university. Moreover, through the NI process, I have had a unique opportunity to see Ahmad's

experiences up close and this has allowed for a direct and meaningful analysis of his experience. Seeing Ahmad big would not have been possible if he was one of many participants in this research. On the other hand, seeing small necessitates that one steps away from the individual and observe the collective. From this perspective, Ahmad's experiences would not be fully explored and the tensions that he has experienced could not be so thoroughly understood. Green says that in seeing small,

“one chooses to see from a detached point of view, to watch behaviors from the perspective of a system, to be concerned with trends and tendencies rather than intentionality and concreteness of everyday life” (1995, p. 10)

A good example of 'seeing small' is a government making educational policy decisions. In this case, the people in government do not have personal relationships with the educators or students that will be affected by their decisions; their concerns, for instance, may stem from budgetary or logistical matters, what Green calls “trends and tendencies,” that will raise educational standards across the country but not necessarily affect the day-to-day lives of the individuals who fall under those decisions. Moreover, governments rarely come directly into contact with the people that their decisions will affect and, therefore, are often removed from the consequences. Looking at Ahmad's story, many of the decisions that have caused tensions in Ahmad's experience were made from the perspective of seeing small. For instance, Ahmad's understanding of what his degree would entail is very different from what actually transpired. More specifically, there are many tensions surrounding the change of his degree from Biology to Education and the removal, and more recently the return⁶, of the thesis portion. Although these decisions may have been misunderstandings on Ahmad's part, the governing body at the university has largely influenced and shaped the decisions that contributed to these tensions. The people in these university bodies often do not have the privilege of seeing big and need to make decisions that would be best for the university and a wider audience. Therefore, the people making important decisions can only see Ahmad as one person among many within the university context and, unfortunately, Ahmad's tension-filled experiences are often not acknowledged. Overall, seeing small is essential for making large-scale decisions but seeing small often overlooks the details of those lives that the decisions affect. Furthermore, it appears that seeing small gains an even wider

⁶ In my final interview with Ahmad, he explained that the university has agreed to include a thesis although there are now several tensions surrounding how long it will be and who will supervise it (field note, May14/11).

lens when we step away from the institutional level and move into a country-wide level.

5.1 Foreign Student Populations In Turkey and Europe

Ahmad is an illustrative example of an individual determined to find his way in a very unfamiliar and tension-filled university experience in Turkey. Many layers of tension were present throughout my conversations with Ahmad as I attempted to see his experience big. I am very grateful for his honesty, his insights, and especially his willingness to openly share these experiences with me over the term of the research. It is clear from our conversations that Ahmad has persevered through many challenging experiences at Doğan University with what appears to be little direct support from the university in general. I am hopeful that by inquiring into Ahmad's university experiences, Ahmad's story may be used to show possible gaps where seeing big may help to improve educational decisions and policy.

In order to better understand the implications of Ahmad's stories, a better understanding of the policies and the realities of the Turkish higher education system is necessary. Turkey is currently in a state of political, economic, institutional and educational reform due in large part to its ongoing ambition to be a full member state of the European Union (Koc, Isiksal, & Bulut, 2007). These changes, along with the rising economic and political status of Turkey, have greatly changed the landscapes in Turkish higher education (Saglamer, 2005). Furthermore, these changes are encouraging more and more international students to flock to Turkey in order to get their university education and, more interestingly, many students are now being actively recruited because of the internationalization of higher education (Naidoo, 2006).

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Turkey had 20,219 non-citizen students studying in tertiary education, or post-secondary education, in 2008 (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). These same statistics show a steady increase in International students at Turkish post-secondary educational institutions each year. For example, only 15,298 non-citizen students studied in Turkish tertiary education institutions in 2004. This trend of increasing foreign, or non-citizen, students in Turkish higher education shows no signs of abating and, according to EURODATA report, European contexts in general are seeing a steadily increasing foreign student population studying in European higher education contexts as well (Kelo, Teichler, & Wachter, 2006). In fact, according to the report, over 1.1 million foreign students were enrolled in tertiary education in 2002-2003, which is roughly 6% of all students studying in the region (2006, p.7). What is even more interesting is

that over half of these 1.1 million students are from outside of the EURODATA region⁷. In other words, over half a million students studying in Europe are from outside of European countries. This means that there is a significant population of students, like Ahmad, who are attempting to navigate unfamiliar educational landscapes throughout Europe. Furthermore, as is evidenced by Ahmad's experience, there are significant cultural and linguistic complexities for foreign students studying in these new situations. For instance, Ahmad comes from a conservative background in the Middle East and his cultural values have largely bumped up against cultural norms at Doğan University. More specifically, Ahmad has struggled to befriend his Turkish peers in large part because he has been uncomfortable with their behaviors, such as drinking alcohol, which are frowned upon in his home culture. I can only imagine if Ahmad had studied in a far more liberal country like Holland where the degree of these cultural and linguistic complexities would no doubt be much larger. Moreover, universities are actively recruiting many of these students for a wide range of reasons and this process of change that universities go through can be understood as 'internationalization.' (Naidoo, 2006). "Internationalization includes the policies and practices undertaken by academic systems and institutions—and even individuals—to cope with the global academic environment. The motivations for internationalization include commercial advantage, knowledge and language acquisition, enhancing the curriculum with international content, and many others" (Altbach & Knight, 2007). As I will show in the next section, internationalization is one of the major processes that brought Ahmad to Turkey and will be one of the major processes to shape future educational policy in higher education.

5.2 Internationalization of Higher Education

As the world continues to fall under the influence of 'globalization,' higher education has been changing to meet the challenge. In response, the process of 'internationalization' is taking place within the worldwide higher education context. Therefore, globalization can be understood as the social and economic processes that act upon educational institutions while internationalization can be understood as a response to these processes as Scott illustrates below:

"Indeed, while globalization of education alludes to the external macro-socio-economic process that influences the way educational institutions operate on the one hand, internationalization of education, on the

⁷ The EURODATA Region includes Turkey as one of the reporting countries.

other, represents the policy-based responses that educational institutions adopt as a result of the impact of globalization” (Scott, 1998)

When considering Ahmad within these processes, we see a student who, thanks to globalization, now has the opportunities to access other countries and their educational institutions. The policies that are in place to respond to increasing international students, like Ahmad, are the results of this internationalization process. Moreover, this process is often guided by many goals within institutions that can range from increasing the amount of international students to becoming more globally competitive. More importantly, however, is “Giving students an intercultural dimension in education, [which] is one of many goals that guides present internationalization strategies” (Otten, 2003, p. 12). Europe was one of the first to openly and actively pursue this ‘intercultural dimension’ through policies of European integration. “EU authorities actively pursued academic internationalization for more than two decades, as part of the move to economic and political integration” (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 293). Furthermore, programs like ERASMUS were designed with this goal in mind and several policy changes took place through this internationalization process (Altbach & Knight, 2007). In considering Ahmad, his experience has been lacking this ‘intercultural dimension’ that Otten refers to even though this is an important goal of the internationalization process. This ‘intercultural dimension’ refers to the need of educational institutions to promote intercultural exchanges as well as train people in intercultural competence (Otten, 2003). Therefore, the promotion of this goal needs to be more central as institutions fall increasingly under the influences of globalization. Clearly, this process of internationalization, as a response to globalization, is having a profound effect on educational institutions.

As part of its educational reforms, Turkey is seeking to attract foreign students to its universities “to improve the quality and cultural composition of the student body, gain prestige, and earn income” (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Moreover, as Turkish universities gain increased international notoriety, as is evidenced by the showing of two Turkish universities on the 2010 Times Higher Education (THE) World Top 200 University Rankings, they are increasingly active in attracting a more diverse student body. For instance, many university rankings now include ‘international mix’ as a category used to score universities (see THE World University Ranking). This category rates universities based on the diversity of their staff and student body where a higher range of diversity gets a higher rating. Consequently, it is beneficial to universities to not only attract students to increase their revenue streams and competitiveness but also to rank higher in these ranking systems, which attract increased international attention and

reputation. In fact, many researchers believe that the current university ranking systems need to do a better job of considering the efforts of universities to meet the challenges of internationalization (Horn, Hendel, & Fry, 2007). One particular research study by Horn, Hendel, and Fry (2007) looked at a multifaceted conception of internationalization to develop a better ranking system, which aims to better portray the international dimension in U.S. universities. What is more interesting perhaps is the conclusion that the researchers end their article with:

“Perhaps explicit rankings of the type presented here will assist university leadership in fulfilling their commitment to internationalization. Our hope is that this will accordingly benefit students by better preparing them for responding effectively to the increasingly intercultural and international challenges of the new century” (Horn, Hendel, & Fry, 2007, p. 352)

Clearly, the researchers are hopeful that their suggestions for a more comprehensive ranking system will help students, like Ahmad, more effectively navigate the university system. Moreover, the researchers are hopeful that university programs, under their revised ranking suggestions, will prepare students better to meet the intercultural and international challenges of the future. Consequently, students like Ahmad, are very beneficial to universities in many ways and there is a strong suggestion that universities better prepare these students through this process of internationalization. In addition, students like Ahmad will benefit from internationalization because they will develop stronger intercultural and international skills to compete in the future. Overall, this process of internationalization can be very beneficial to educational institutions if they develop alongside this process rather than against it. Having said this, it would appear that the Turkish education system places emphasis on the recruitment of international students in order to gain the benefits of internationalization. However, there appears to be some gaps in the support mechanisms for these students throughout their time in Turkey, which need to be plugged in order to successfully fulfill the goals of internationalization.

5.3 Adapting to Higher Education as a Foreign Student

Hartshorne and Baucom (2007) set out to investigate the experiential differences between American graduates and international graduates studying in the United States. Their research focused on student perceptions, barriers and adjustments students must overcome, the factors that hinder or facilitate these experiences and, finally, how they themselves view these factors. Their research speaks volumes to the difficulties international students face in unfamiliar

cultures and places. In terms of initial barriers, their study revealed two barriers that were the most widely discussed between the two international graduate students who took part in the research: communication skills and culture shock (Hartshorne & Baucom, 2007, p. 82).

“Language barriers were more evident with one participant, who stated that, even with knowing the language, characteristics such as tone, context, and sense of humor often lead to misunderstandings. One participant stated, “the simple example is when the American student, they are talking something and laugh. We can’t feel the humor anymore. But we really understand what they are talking about, but we can’t feel what humor it is.” Culture shock was also a major barrier for both participants, initially. For one participant, culture shock led to homesickness. For the other participant, it caused difficulty interacting with others. For each, the change in language and culture caused an initial feeling of being overwhelmed with the graduate school experience” (2007, p. 82)

It is clear from the passage above that these students faced significant hurdles when they first arrived in America. Although their levels of English were at a high enough level to be admitted to a graduate degree, they struggled in dealing with contextualized language that was unfamiliar to them. Furthermore, they suffered from a feeling of disconnect with their own cultures leading to homesickness and difficulties interacting with their American counterparts. In reading the passage above, I am reminded of the clear parallels to Ahmad and his initial experiences in Turkey. Not only was he struggling to learn English in the preparatory school at Doğan University but he was also challenged with improving his Turkish in order to fit into the surrounding Turkish culture. He spoke many times in our conversations about feeling confused and separated from his Turkish peers and society in general. Moreover, he often had trouble building relationships with his Turkish teachers and classmates because of a gap in cultural understanding both on his part and theirs. Thus, communication skills became a major source of difficulty for Ahmad just like the participants in Hartshorne and Baucom research. For Ahmad, there were many tensions that stemmed from his comfort level in the classroom, especially with his Turkish peers. Moreover, because of his difficulties with English proficiency, he often struggled with communicating with his teachers. Although Ahmad and I never talked specifically about feelings of inadequacy in the classroom, I suspect that this was very much a part of his educational experience.

On the whole, it is evident that international students suffer from many barriers both in the classroom and outside of it because they struggle with adjusting to an unfamiliar and challenging educational landscape. Interestingly, Hartshorne and Baucom (2007) suggest that providing ‘varying levels of support’ among other things will help students overcome these barriers. This includes intercultural support and training for faculty and staff as well as the dissemination of information about where international students can find support when they need it (2007, p. 85). This is something that all institutions should seriously consider as the amount of international students continue to rise.

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