

School Libraries in Istanbul, Turkey

İstanbul'da Okul Kütüphaneleri

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Abstract

Libraries are important in supporting the curriculum and educational mission of schools. The purpose of this study was to describe and evaluate the current status of a private primary school's library in Istanbul, Turkey, and to formulate recommendations for improvement. This case study was accomplished through a mixed method involving questionnaires and observation. A survey with semi-structured questions was administered to students, teachers, and the librarian regarding their perceptions of the school library and their desires for the school library. Questionnaires administered to teachers and the librarian of its sister school provide a counterpoint. Observations provided information about the current functional level and nature of usage of the library. The survey was administered in 2007 with a follow-up visit in 2008. The research achieved the specific, practical purpose of identifying areas for development and potential challenges to that development in the school's library, taking into account the input of its constituents. It also provides suggestions for those who might pursue broader research about the needs and future possibilities for school libraries in Turkey.

Keywords: Primary school libraries, Private school libraries, Constructivist education, Istanbul, Turkey

Öz

Kütüphaneler, okulların eğitim görevlerini ve ders programlarını desteklemede önemli kurumlardır. Bu çalışmanın amacı İstanbul'daki mevcut özel okul kütüphanelerini değerlendirmektir. Gelişmeler için önerileri formüle etmek için bu alan araştırması, hem bir anket uygulamasını hem de gözlem yönetimini içermektedir. Anket çalışmasında yarı yapılandırılmış sorular; öğrenciler ve öğretmenlere yöneltilerek, okul kütüphanecisinin ne ve nasıl olması gerektiği ile ilgili bilgiler elde edilmiştir. Gözlemlerle sonucunda ise kütüphanelerin doğal kullanımı ve mevcut fonksiyonları hakkında bilgi sağlanmıştır. 2007 ve 2008 yıllarında yürütülen araştırmada okul kütüphanelerinde gelişim sağlamak için potansiyel fırsatlar ve gelişim alanlarının belirlenmesine yönelik bulgulara ulaşılmıştır. Çalışma aynı zamanda Türkiye'de okul kütüphanelerine yönelik olarak yapılabilecek daha geniş kapsamdaki çalışmalar için de öneri niteliğinde bilgilere yer vermektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: İlkokul Kütüphaneleri, Özel okul kütüphaneleri, Yapıcı eğitim, İstanbul, Türkiye

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Introduction

In Turkey, the demand for higher education far exceeds the domestic supply. Of the approximately 1.5 million (and rising) students who take the university entrance exams each year, approximately half score high enough to qualify to enroll in a four year bachelor's program. However, due to lack of space, only the top 25% of those qualified obtain a seat (Yükseköğretim Kurulu, 2002 or 2003). Coupled with the compatibility of the Turkish higher education system to American and European systems (Yükseköğretim Kurulu 2004 or 2005), there is opportunity for foreign universities to attract some of the 500,000 or so academically-able students who annually do not receive one of the scarce university seats in their own country. The unmet demand for university seats has created a niche for certain private primary and secondary schools in Turkey. Primary and secondary school students who experience constructivist methods of teaching instead of the traditionally predominant lecture method of teaching are better poised to succeed in American and European universities where the constructivist methods are in use. Thus funnel schools have developed to prepare Turkish students for higher education abroad. *Midwestern Koleji* (the names of schools have been changed for anonymity) is one of these funnel schools which is associated with an American university.

Background

Midwestern Koleji (MK) is a private primary and secondary school in Istanbul, Turkey. At the time of this study in 2007, it had been open for three years and educated grades pre-K-7 (ages three to thirteen). It will add one grade per year until it will enroll students through grade 12 (age eighteen). The name emulates that of a Midwestern American institution, *Midwestern State University* (MSU), with which the school has a memorandum of understanding. Languages of instruction at MK are English and Turkish. Its curriculum is based on constructivist principles. Its sister school, *Alman Koleji* (AK) is owned by the same person and located on the same campus. AK was established in 1995. This pre-K through 12 school uses German and Turkish as languages of instruction. Because the sister school is geographically close and similar in mission, I will incorporate some description of it to serve as a counterpoint to the description of MK.

At the invitation of the school owner, a delegation of American educators and the author, a librarian, visited *Midwestern Koleji* in September-October 2007. The educators' purpose was to model constructivist methods of teaching to MK teachers. My responsibilities as the librarian member of the delegation were two-fold: to complete the research study and to perform a library organization task that would improve MK library's functioning. The purpose of the research study was to ascertain the current state of the library, as perceived by its constituents; and to identify what improvements and changes the constituents desired for their library. Constituents are defined as the

direct users of the library: the students, teachers, and librarian. Data was collected by observation and from direct users via questionnaire. To a lesser extent, the school owner and the American group leaders involved in the project were constituents as well. The school owner communicated in an interview that he would like the library to resemble an Internet café. The group leaders communicated their desires to me directly by assigning me a task to complete during the two-week stay designed to improve the functioning of the library. As more information was gathered and expectations were adjusted, the nature of the task changed from identifying a suitable automation system, to assisting in collection development, to developing an organizational scheme.

Libraries in this Study: Because the vision and mission of MK is to emulate American schools, to prepare its students for the American form of higher education, and to provide to its students resources and services comparable to that of American counterparts, a library was incorporated into the school's design from inception. The school libraries of MK and AK are staffed by one librarian who divides her time between the two. Midwestern Koleji's library is housed in a classroom on the second floor of the school. The three-year-old MK library was in its infancy: at the time of the study, it contained books and shelves, tables and chairs, and one computer on the staff desk. It lacked any observable organizational, circulation, or inventory system. The most frequent purposes for which the library was used appeared to be as a classroom and as a study hall – that is, it was not a dedicated space. Alman Koleji's library is housed in a structure separate from the school building. This historical Greek chapel served the building in its earlier iterations as a hospital and orphanage. The chapel was repurposed to serve as a library the same year AK was established in 1995, and it is a dedicated space.

Literature Review: There is little literature available in Turkish or English about the current status of school libraries in Turkey. In an eight-page selected bibliography of Turkish Librarianship, only two entries were about school libraries, and both those entries were published in 1966 (Tonta, 1995). A content analysis of *Türk Kütüphaneciliği*, the predominant LIS research journal in Turkey, mentions no research on school libraries between 1952 and 1994 (Yontar and Yalvaç, 2000). More recently, in 2004, the first Turkish conference of school librarians took place. Selected papers from the conference proceedings emphasized the importance of school libraries, regular reading, and the role of the teacher in familiarizing students with the school library; examined the history of Village Institutes' effect on library establishment; and proposed greater use of websites and subject headings (Yüksel, 2004). In his conference paper proposing greater cooperation between public and school libraries, Yılmaz states that school libraries will only become an organic part of the educational process when the educational system moves away from memorization as the main educational method and into research. He notes also that only 8% of primary schools have libraries and often these are statistical only: a library sign is attached to a room but it cannot actually be used as a library due to staffing, collection, or other constraints (Yılmaz, 2004).

Dr. H. İnci Önal is one of few Turkish researchers actively writing on topics of school libraries and librarianship. She found that although all the schools she studied have space designated as a library, inadequate collections, inadequate funding, and lack of systematic organization are widespread problems (Önal, 1995). Despite the Ministry of Education's standards for school libraries (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2006) "Generally, many facilities in the children's and school library services in Turkey are old, out-of-date, poorly maintained, uncomfortable, unsafe, and lack specific design elements that are likely to enhance teaching, learning, behaviour, and other desirable outcomes" (Önal, 2009). Many libraries lack the funds to provide the core list of books recommended by the Ministry of Education (Önal, 2005).

Research Questions: The research questions for this study were influenced by the lack of literature available, which was especially limited prior to departure from the United States; and the communicated goals of the school owner: to assess and improve the school library. It is necessary to ascertain one's current status in order to identify areas for improvement. Thus the research questions were general and at ground level:

What are the perceptions of the teachers, students, and librarian of the school library?

What do the teachers, students, and librarian desire in a school library?

The purpose was to determine what constituents thought of the school library as it was at the time, and to identify what changes constituents would like to see in the school library in the future.

Methodology

Action research was appropriate for this descriptive and evaluative case study, as the study was envisioned as an initial step in both preparing recommendations and, potentially, in cycle of research leading to action. Bob Dicks defines action research thusly: "Action research can be described as a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time. In most of its forms it does this by using a cyclic or spiral process which alternates between action and critical reflection and; in the later cycles, continuously refining methods, data and interpretation in the light of the understanding developed in the earlier cycles. It is thus an emergent process which takes shape as understanding increases; it is an iterative process which converges towards a better understanding of what happens. In most of its forms it is also participative ... and qualitative" (Dicks, 1999). As with much action research, this study focused on local application, so broader generalization may be limited.

Assumptions and Task Performed: Based on the Midwestern State University educator group leaders' previous experiences with this school and information

conveyed to them by contacts, it was assumed that the MK school library resembled a school library prior to widespread automation. That is, we anticipated a discovery tool in the form of a card catalog or a simple database, with a circulation system that was either manual or home-grown. Thus the task assigned to the author by the group leaders prior to departure was to identify automation systems suitable for school and small libraries. Once the group leaders learned that there was an automation system, my task was revised to assisting the school librarian with collection development of Turkish language materials. Soon after arriving, though, it became clear that further collection development was premature. One must first know what a library contains in order to strengthen areas in which it is weak, and to avoid purchasing duplicates in areas in which the collection is strong. Initially it was not possible to ascertain this, as the library materials were placed on shelves randomly. To facilitate areas of strength and weakness, in consultation with the librarian and American teachers, I established a shelving system based on categories of language, fiction or non-fiction, and reading level. A teacher volunteered to place labels indicating categories on books and on shelves, and student volunteers shelved materials into their assigned places.

Within a few days we were able to get an overall sense of the collection, and ascertain which subcategories had more material and which had less. Fiction far outnumbered non-fiction, English outnumbered Turkish language materials and reference sources were lacking. This initial evaluation was a first step toward collection development.

While acquisition is one side of collection development, deacquisition or weeding is the other. Members of the MSU teacher delegation examined the teaching tools and workbooks in the library. They decided to keep the exemplary ones and remove the poorer quality ones from the collection; however, the concept of weeding was challenging for school personnel. The vice principal stated, "we don't get rid of books," and devised a compromise by removing the undesirable books to a storage area. The administration's attitude toward the collection was mixed. While conscious deacquisition was frowned upon, the administration did not establish loss prevention measures to prevent serendipitous deacquisition. That is, when teachers found library books useful in their teaching, they moved the material to their classroom collections. It is believed that students, either intentionally or through ignorance of library culture, took books home and didn't return them. Utilizing the automated circulation and inventory control system, coupled with consistent adult supervision when children visited the library, would be valuable steps in maintaining the collection. The incident also provides a lesson about how great care should be taken in the selection and acquisition processes at this school: because there is administrative resistance to deacquisition, it's especially important that only quality materials that will stay relevant over time enter the collection.

Limitations: There were three main limitations affecting this study. First, the time limit of two weeks for data collection was a significant limitation. During the first week,

data collection was limited to observation while performing the task described above and distributing consent forms to parents. The second week consisted of administering the questionnaire. It was not possible to field test the survey due to time constraints. It is likely that the response rate would have been higher if the researcher had remained longer, as potential participants would have had more opportunity to find time in their schedules to fill out the questionnaires and more parents would have had time to provide consent. A second limitation stemmed from the fact that the study was bilingual. That is, whenever a questionnaire is translated from one language to another, and responses are translated back, there's the possibility that some nuance is lost. The third limitation was characteristics of the researcher herself. While my perspective as a Turkish-speaking American might provide some valuable insights only available from an outsider, I lack the full knowledge of the language and culture of a person raised in Turkey.

Participants: Participants in this study included students, teachers, and the librarian of Midwestern Koleji; plus teachers and the librarian of Alman Koleji. Statistics on the total number of persons in each category were difficult to obtain, and were obtained primarily through contacts rather than documentation. Three MK students participated of 254. These were two of the 26 seventh graders, and one of the 20 fifth graders. Nine MK teachers of 40 participated in the survey. Seven AK teachers of 80 participated and no AK students did. The librarian filled out two questionnaires, one based on her experience at MK and another based on her experience at AK.

Data Collection Procedures: Official approval for conducting the study was obtained from the two schools' administration. Teachers and the librarian were provided with a letter that described the study. Parents of MK students who attended a school-sponsored event were verbally informed of the purpose of the study; letters with description and consent forms were distributed to parents at the event. The vice principal offered two forms of assistance regarding student participation both of which had to be declined as they were contrary to Midwestern State University's Human Subjects Review Board (HRB) policies. First, he offered to gather all seventh graders together and administer the questionnaire as a mandatory school assignment. However, according to Midwestern State University's HRB policies, all participants are to participate of their own free will. When initially no parental consent forms were returned, the vice principal offered to write his name on the forms in place of the parents, showing that that administrators of the school are culturally permitted or expected to act in loco parentis. However, shortly thereafter three parents consented to have their children participate in the study, and those children consented to participate in the study. All participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

Questionnaires in the language of the participant's choice (English or Turkish) were distributed to teachers and the librarian. The researcher had initially intended to administer the student questionnaires verbally and thus had prepared a document

containing questions in both English and Turkish; however, the three students preferred to respond in written form. Additionally, although their native language was Turkish, they preferred to write their answers in English, stating, "It will be fun."

Data Analysis: Responses were transcribed and compiled. The responses were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Codes were developed and themes were identified. These were classified under the following categories:

- 1) Physical space
- 2) Resources
- 3) Activities and Services
- 4) Staff

Findings of the Study

Students of Midwestern Koleji: Of the three Midwestern Koleji students who responded, two were seventh graders and one was a fifth grader. Overall, they have a favorable impression of the library: the physical space, the resources, and services provided. As for purposes for using the library, reading was an activity cited by all three of them, while one each listed playing chess and having class as activities they engage in in the library.

Their intentions for some of the responses were difficult to discern. For example, all three responded that yes there were computers and they liked them – but the room didn't have computers for students. It's possible that despite having the questions available in both languages, the content of some questions themselves were confusing to them. Another factor was that all three decided to answer in English, which is not their native language. I suspect that answers may have been more descriptive and illuminating had they responded in their native language.

Focusing on the responses that were unambiguous, it is possible to discern that while they express overall satisfaction with the current state of the library, they imagine big things for an ideal library. Big and more were the themes of these students' desires. They wanted a large space "like a football stadium" or "like [a] palace" with a big collection, specifically of books. They didn't mention any other materials a library might collect. When prompted to identify what services the library staff would provide in an ideal library, two of three wanted the librarian to find or provide books for them on particular subjects, football (soccer) and space. The third kept with the football theme and responded that the library staff would "clean my football shoes," which he confirmed was a joke.

Teachers of Midwestern Koleji: The responding teachers at MK are in the early stages of their careers. Among the nine respondents, the average length of time they've been in the teaching profession is 3.4 years, and teaching at MK an average of 1.4 years. Subjects taught include English, math, science, social studies, and baseball. All responded that they have used the library, and 7 of the nine did this for library resources, as opposed to another purpose such as teaching a non-related class. Five of the teachers, or 55% use the library to find something to read with their class and four or 44% report using the library to plan an assignment. Only one or 11% has consulted with the library staff about resources or planned a program or lesson with the library staff.

Regarding the current library, the teachers like the comfortable, calm, well-lit environment. One person liked that it was always open. Seven of the nine, or 77% cited a lack of adequate resources as something they disliked. One cited difficulty in finding resources that are there and one noted the inability to check in and check out materials. Five or 55% have looked for something in the library and not found it. In response, some found information online or at another library. One postponed a lesson and another invited publishers to the school and provided the librarian with a list of books to purchase.

When it came to designing an ideal library, the teachers echoed then expanded upon the students' themes of big and more. Much of what they listed as desirable is currently lacking in the MK library.

The physical space would be large, comfortable, well-lit and inviting, with vibrant colors and furniture in various sizes to accommodate various sizes of children. A reading corner within an area designed for small children was desired by one respondent, and private reading and study areas were desired by another.

Teachers desired a variety of resource types suitable for all ages: books, audio books, DVDs, CDs, periodicals, electronic databases, computers with Internet, a photocopier, and a projector. One respondent had a specific collection size in mind, of 50,000 to 100,000 books. Respondents desired specific types and topics of materials, such as nonfiction suitable for all grades. Topics of aborigines and the solar system were given as an example. One respondent specifically desired books in on baseball for both adults and students, stating that "The players would read in English if there were books available [about baseball] because they are interested in baseball." Others requested readers, poetry for upper grades, teachers' resources, kindergarten concept books, and storybooks for preschool ages.

Three wanted the library to be organized well. Three other teachers desired a circulation system in particular. Two teachers would take their students to the library to do research if there were suitable resources and services, in addition to taking them to read for pleasure.

In terms of staff characteristics, the responding teachers indicated that the library staff should be available all the time, helpful and smiling, well-educated and well-informed, and would make people feel at home when they enter. The staff would provide reference and reader's advisory, keep materials organized, teach information literacy and research methods, and get people into the habit of using the library.

While the combination of desired features seems substantial, these are all common features in well-equipped libraries.

Teachers of Alman Koleji: The seven participating teachers at Alman Koleji were more experienced than the Midwestern Koleji teachers, with an average length of time in the profession of 14.4 years, and teaching at Alman Koleji for 6.6 years. While they cited some of the same issues with resources, services, and staff, those issues were cited less frequently and seemed less pressing.

When asked about the current library, multiple people liked the fact that it was a historical space and enjoyed the smell of books, with one saying, "I learn peacefully in a historical environment among the smell of books." The peaceful and quiet atmosphere was appealing.

When asked what they dislike about the school library, three answered "Nothing," two had no answer, and two cited lack of adequate resources, "The number and the variety of books is quite low." However, another found that the library's "having many and rich materials" is an aspect to like about the library.

Four went to the library to do research and three said that they read there in their leisure time. None indicated that they bring their classes to the library.

When it came to designing an ideal library, two of the seven teachers gave no answer. While one wanted the library to remain historical, two others wished it to be more centrally located. Four respondents desired public online catalogs, from which they and their students could search for material and find it by location or classification number.

Respondents' main desire for staff was that the staff knowledgeable and helpful: "I would like the staff to be able to answer all kinds of questions on the library and be able to solve the problems," said one, and "Library personnel should know everything very well and help us do research"

The strong desire for big and more that we saw with MK respondents is lacking here. However, research was mentioned several times in multiple contexts, as in, if there were an online computer catalog, "I'd bring my students to do research and read" and in an ideal library, staff would direct teachers and students in doing research.

Librarian: The same librarian serves both school libraries part time, so it's no surprise that her responses regarding the two libraries are similar.

The librarian expressed desire for more involvement from teachers at both schools. However, her tone is stronger with Midwestern Koleji than with Alman Koleji. She observed that MK teachers don't come to the library, while AK teachers sometimes do. As might be expected, she attributes the low usage of the library by teachers at MK to the fact that there are few books. She also noted that the MK teachers aren't in the habit of reading, while at Avrupa, the reason attributed is, "their time is limited and they are busy." She expressed the wish that the teachers of MK would "contribute to the enrichment" of the library; which I believe is a wish that teachers would contribute financially or donate materials to the collections.

The librarian's perceptions of teacher usage is interesting, because both MK and AK teachers identified themselves as library users. There are many possible reasons for the discrepancy, one being that perhaps the few teachers who were library users were most motivated to fill out the survey. Or perhaps library usage by teachers occurs at times when the librarian is not there to see it.

The librarian's thoughts about an ideal library were philosophical rather than of a practical design. She wrote in both the MK and AK queries to imagine the perfect school library, "I would feel that I am in a vast world, and it's exciting that I can reach anywhere in minutes." Her main desire echoed that of other MK participants – for more resources in a large space.

Conclusion

As Yılmaz (2004) noted, some school libraries are libraries in name only, as various constraints prevent them from being fully used as libraries. MK's library is more than a merely a statistic, but is not a yet fully functional library. The MK library does succeed in serving as a pleasant part-time reading room and a source of materials to read for pleasure, particularly fiction. On the other hand, part of the time it is needed as a classroom instead of library, it has fewer resources than constituents desire, and it lacks the services and staffing that make a library truly functional. For example, lack of a working catalog and inventory system create obstacles to discovering what the collection contains. This limits how well the library can support the curriculum, as neither students, teachers, nor librarian can easily identify material suitable for a particular lesson. The implementation of an organizational shelving system was a first step toward improvement. Once categorized, it was possible to observe the strengths and weaknesses of the collection.

When the school owner incorporates a library into his new school from the beginning, instead of as an afterthought or not at all, we can surmise that the administration

values school libraries, and this does seem to be the case at MK. However, based on this researcher's observations and the results of the survey, it's clear that MK library has numerous areas in which development is necessary before it may serve as an optimal resource for the school. It will take overt, consistent support from the administration and commitment from staff to bring the library up to a well-functioning level. Forms that administrative support can take include financial and functional. Examples of financial support include establishing a budget which is sufficient to increase collection development, fully staff the library, and fund the purchase and implementation of public access catalogs. Functional support could take the form of utilizing the existing circulation system and prevent students from using the library without adult supervision, both of which could deter loss. Even at current staffing levels, there are steps staff can take to improve the functionality of the library. The librarian can continue the process of categorizing and labeling materials, establish written policies and procedures, reach out to collaborate with teachers in lesson planning and collection development, and keep children invested in the library by letting them serve as volunteers. In a discussion with this author, the school owner stated that he'd like the library to go from resembling a warehouse to resembling an Internet café. That's a substantial goal, but doable. As part of the reflection stage of the action research cycle, I've submitted a report with recommendations for the MK library. Assuming that some participatory action is taken, it will be appropriate to repeat the cycle of investigation then reflection at MK library's next stage of development, with the goal of promoting noticeable advancement with each subsequent cycle.

To summarize, the research served a number of purposes. Using the input of constituents, it achieved the specific, practical purpose of identifying areas for development and potential challenges to that development in MK's library. Additionally, this survey makes a small contribution into a developing picture of the nature and needs of private schools' libraries in Istanbul, Turkey. The case study provides some corroboration of the findings of Önal's 1995 study, in which inadequate collections, inadequate funding, and lack of systematic organization were identified as challenges needing attention. It is hoped that this contribution to research about school libraries in Turkey will spur other researchers to examine Turkish school libraries in more depth and breadth. Additionally, it is hoped that such research will lead to improvements in school libraries, so they may support school curricula as optimally as possible.

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