

A Journey to Different Culture and Education System: Lessons Learned from the US, Implications for Life and Education

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Abstract

This autoethnography is related to my story as a Turkish parent while I lived in the United States (US) over a period of three years. I illustrate what we learned and how it changed my daughters' life experiences pertaining to cultural and education systems differences. Experiences, challenges, and lessons learned, the differences between the two cultures and the education system contribute to the cultural and educational development of my daughters. My daughters, whom I took to America as two little children, were now two young girls who had lived in two different cultures and were raised in different education systems when they returned to Türkiye after three years. As both an educator and a mother, living in the United States and my daughters' education enabled me to observe the American education system, change my perspective, and compare it with Türkiye. I had the opportunity to question what parenting is like in different cultures and education systems. I hope this autoethnography will encourage adopting an empathetic mindset towards parents and their children moving to different cultures around the world and trying to adapt to different educational systems.

Keywords: Parent, Daughter, Education system, Culture, Autoethnography.

Article History:

Received: 02.02.2026
Research Article

Accepted: 05.06.2026

Recommended Citation:

Kiral, B. (2026). A Journey to Different Culture and Education System: Lessons Learned from the US. *International Journal on New Trends in Education and Their Implications (IJONTE)*, 17(1), 58-74

Introduction

My living in the US was the most valuable life experiences. I understood a huge conscious of American culture and education system. I realized the differences with my beliefs and rules I knew; compared and questioned. I had the chance to criticize and question the Turkish education system. I learned many lessons from the US, which helped both me and my children to mature. I did this study to reveal what we experienced during the three years we lived in America, my perspective as a parent, a different culture, and education system. This autoethnography resulted from living and observing the cultural practices of the US. Our experience, what I learned from a different culture, changed my perspective on the education system and helped me to mature.

According to Bandura's (1971) Social Learning Theory and Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Development Theory, the people in our environment have an impact on our learning. The individual development of the person develops depending on the interactions in the social environment. The individual makes sense of and internalizes the current situation according to the cultural learning environments in which individuals live. From this point of view, the role of other people in our close environment in our learning is an undeniable fact. Clift et al. (2005) and Wall (2006) state that all social actions are influenced by

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both individual experiences and environments and interactions. Interactions and experiences have led to the writing of this autoethnography (Mendez, 2013).

The author's primary view is that individual focuses on the social and cultural elements of the experiences, which has a broad ethnographic perspective (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al. 2011; Winkler, 2018). Autoethnography is not only the personal story of the author, but also the story of the individual in a broader cultural sense (Butz and Besio, 2009; Creswell, 2013). In this sense, it is a relational pursuit in which writing draws on the author's experiences to expand knowledge and comprehension of sociology (Sparkes, 2000). In general, this approach started with a personal narrative (Anderson, 2006) of me and my family. In this narrative, I analyzed our own experiences, made comparisons (Brearley, 2000; Tharar, 2009), and made a sociological discourse about my own narrative and the culture in which I lived (Glesne, 2011; Wall, 2016). With this working method, I tried to make sense of past experiences through the culture I am in and the cultural identities I have (Ellis et al. 2010; Patton, 2014). My story consists of living in America daughters and a period of three years, experiencing being a parent in America through my daughters, and collecting rich data from my observations. This autoethnography is about the challenge of my cultural learnings, understandings and the education system and the breaking down of my prejudices.

Three Years in American Culture, Education System, and Parenting

After a long journey (a one-hour bus ride to the airport, total 3 flights- a one-hour flight from hometown to İstanbul-11 hours flight from İstanbul to Chicago and a one-hour flight from Chicago to our city, a 45-minute car ride to get airport to the hotel where we would be staying, nearly 25 hours with waiting times), when we arrived to the city where we would be living in the US, our priority was to get our children to school as soon as possible. In Türkiye, schools open in the 1st or 2nd week of September. In the US, however, this situation was completely different. Schools opened in mid-August. Due to our work permit requirements in Türkiye, we were able to be in the US, when we arrived, the schools had been open for a week. Of course, for our children to enroll in school, we first had to rent a house. But before renting a house, we needed to get a cell phone number. We needed an American cell phone number so that we could call real estate agents and do other things easily.

The house finding process was very tiring for us. This was because we had arrived in an unfamiliar city, a different country, and even a completely different continent. Life was very different than in Türkiye. There was no way we could go to places in America that we could go on foot or by public transportation in Türkiye. "What was life like? Where could we buy the products, we were looking for?" These were all question marks in our minds. There was one thing we knew. We had to buy a car, but "how and from whom?" In order to buy a car, we had to get to know the neighborhood a bit. Public transportation was not as frequent as in Türkiye. It ran at certain hours. We rented a car, we used the internet of the hotel we were staying at to look at house advertisements, we met with real estate agents and made appointments. We visited the houses. This process was very tiring. Because we had researched the schools on the relevant websites. We wanted to rent a house in neighborhoods where school achievement was high, and crime rates were lower. In the US, school grades and school results affect the rent of houses in the neighborhood. We looked at the crime statistics and maps. We had two daughters, we were in a different country, and we wanted our children to get a good education. Until that age, we had watched some American movies about racism, bullying, and crime. Even though it was a movie, the crime statistics showed this. So, we tried to have as good a school and neighborhood as possible, which of course cost us time. Finding a house for rent was becoming difficult in this sense. Because if you don't have family, relatives, or close friends in a foreign country, you act more cautiously. I can say this with an open heart.

After one week of trying, we got our apartment in the neighborhood of the school we wanted our children to go to. This made us very happy. Because the children starting school was more important to us than anything else. It was not easy to get the house, actually. Because we did not have a history in the US, the landlords were more cautious. With the help of an American friend as a reference and paying a nonrefundable fee, we rented our apartment. Our apartment was in a complex. There were eight apartments in our apartment. Four apartments facing the front garden and four apartments facing the back garden. A two-story apartment with eight apartments. How cute it looked to us. With its lush

green garden and brown brick exterior, we were like in the movies. Our apartment building had a communal washing machine and dryer. This is how the laundry system usually works in America. There were communal laundry centers or apartment buildings having communal washing machines. In Türkiye, each house has its own washing machine. Shared use is only common in university dormitories. We were witnessing another different culture.

Our apartment was located in a complex. There were about 120 flats in our complex. We lived on the ground floor. The balcony of our apartment opened directly onto a garden of lush green grass. We admired the landscape of the gardens of the houses we visited, even if they were apartments in America. Opening our balcony to the lush green garden would give us the chance to observe cute rabbits, ducks, and especially squirrels in the future. Because seeing squirrels in gardens is something that is not possible in my country. In Türkiye, there are stray dogs and cats on the streets-gardens, and even in front of shops. In fact, dogs sometimes disturb people, and bites sometimes occur. There are no squirrels, ducks, and rabbits. The country was a wonder of nature. People had cats and dogs in America, even more than one. But they lived at home in a controlled manner, under veterinary. Of course, there are people in Türkiye who keep dogs and cats at home, but this rate is less than the rate of stray dogs.

The process of renting a house was also different than in Türkiye. Landlords and property managers in the US were more cautious. The reason for this may be that too many immigrants live in the country and tenants may be irresponsible without paying the rent or using the house cleanly. But we convinced the landlord that we would keep the house clean because we don't smoke, our children go to middle school (they are not likely to scratch or paint the walls or parquet like small children), we don't have pets (if you have a pet, the rent increases accordingly), and we don't wear shoes in the house. We take off our shoes at the door and wear clean slippers at home. This is part of our culture. I think this is more hygienic in terms of health as children sit on the carpet and play puzzles, lego, etc. Taking off our shoes when entering the house was different for Americans. They constantly questioned "why?". This is purely a cultural habit. In our country this is an unwritten rule. Another difference was that all the houses we visited were carpeted from wall to wall. In Türkiye, carpets are bought according to the color of the furniture, whereas in America it was a bit different. We were learning slowly, and life was interesting to us.

Americans hung flags in their homes, workplaces, schools, shops, in short, everywhere in their country (without a national day or holiday). I thought "how much they love their flag". We love our flag, too. But we hang it in our homes either on national holidays or on special occasions related to the country. I think the practice in the US was more valuable in terms of instilling national consciousness and love for the citizenship and the flag.

After we rented our house, we slowly started to buy our household goods and furnish our house. But our most important job was the school registration of the children. In the US, provinces were divided into small cities and each city had its own national education directorate. In Türkiye, instead of being divided into cities, there are districts and district national education directorates. I can say that the system in the US is better. Because each of the neighborhoods called cities had its own city school district, schools, academic calendar, functioning, and activities, all of which were determined by its own education commission. This makes it easier to act according to regional differences. School holidays, entry and exit times, school buses, aids, and all kinds of activities varied according to the regions. In Türkiye, since there is a central government, holidays, school operations and programs are carried out according to the instructions of the center. Only special activities of schools are carried out by provincial or district national education directorates. This is a very limited situation. Schools have no or very limited autonomy.

The official institution, which is called provincial or district national education directorate in Türkiye, but it is called X city school district in the US with a slightly different organization. We made an appointment for registration at X city school district. On the day of the appointment, we showed up with our children's documents. They made us fill out various forms. We had taken our children's education documents translated into English and their vaccination papers in our file. They registered the children to middle school. They refused to accept our children's vaccinations and directed us to the necessary official

institution and demanded that we completed the vaccinations before school started. We agreed and got them vaccinated. Then they told us that we could see our children's school and call Mrs. Y and make an appointment. Mrs. Y was an ESOL teacher. We called her and made an appointment. Picture 1 shows our daughters' middle school.

Picture 1.

My daughters' Middle school



Picture 1 shows the middle school our children attended. When we saw the school, we liked it very much because it was very different from the school structures in my country. The school was one-story. Whereas schools in Türkiye could have 2-3-4 or even 5 floors. I think it must not be nice to be a primary school child to a 4-5 storey building. In my country, only children were given "the right to education". According to the 1982 Constitution, the Right to Education is a public service that the state must provide to citizens (Akyüz, 2016). It is also one of the basic principles in the National Education Basic Law No. 1739. In addition to being a fundamental human right, the right to education is a prerequisite for the realization of other fundamental rights. Through the right to education, the individual gains the knowledge and awareness of how to exercise, protect and demand his/her other rights (Kepenekci, 2007). Therefore, the right to education is one of the rights that enable the individual to be a useful individual to society. Education is the most fundamental condition for the establishment of a democratic social order and the realization of human rights (Kiral, 2021). Awareness of democracy in society can only be established through education. The most effective way to reduce social inequalities in society is through education. Therefore, providing education to its citizens is among the most important duties of the state (Akyüz, 2016). The Republic of Türkiye recognizes the right to education for individuals. Education is the most effective tool in understanding, adopting and transferring basic human rights and freedoms to practice (Karaman Kepenekci, 2004). In this context, it can be said that the right to education has a special importance and role among all rights. From an individual perspective, this right is of great importance in knowing, using, developing and protecting other rights and freedoms (Karaman Kepenekci, 2007).

Education is a right, but schools, which play an extremely important role in preparing children for life and socializing them, also need to ensure the physical health, development, and protection of students (Karaman Kepenekci and Taşkın, 2017). Therefore, issues such as schools being prepared for unexpected situations, ensuring the safety of the physical and social environment, making the elements related to ensuring the safety of the physical and social environment appropriate, and health constitute the scope of school safety (Turhan and Turan, 2012). However, giving children only the right to education does not necessarily mean security. I understood this much better when I went to the US. When we saw the city we lived in and other states in the US, we saw that the school structures, including the high school, were built in single storeys. A few examples of my own pictures of my daughters' schools are given in Picture 2-3.

Picture 2-3.

My daughters' school





As seen in Picture 2-3 when I saw the daughters' middle school, I realized how lucky the children in America were in terms of the physical environment of the school, and how unlucky the children in my country were in this sense, and frankly, I felt unhappy for the children in my country. Similarly, the school gardens were in a similar situation. Pictures 4-5 show examples of school gardens in the US.

Pictures 4-5

The garden of my daughters' school



As seen in the pictures 4-5, my children's schoolyards in America were uniquely beautiful. A lush green lawn, an environment where ducks and wildlife were protected, a playground for the children to have fun, trees and most importantly, no iron walls resembling prisons. What about in Türkiye? In Türkiye, the schools that children attend have concrete gardens. There are prison-like iron bars around the schools. There is also no grass, and the number of trees is limited. This situation is disadvantageous for children in Türkiye. The metaphor of schools as prisons finds meaning here. In the school-as-prison metaphor, students perceive themselves as prisoners in prison, teachers as guards and the school principal as the warden of the prison. According to this metaphor, which emerged as a result of unfavorable perceptions towards the school, stakeholders in the education system see themselves as convicts and the school as a cold jail where they are obliged to be (Arslan, 2020; Silman and Şimşek, 2006).

Considering the complementary and supportive aspect of school gardens (Schaefer, 2003), school gardens gain importance as much as the planning and design of school buildings (Arslan-Muhacir and Yavuz-Özalp, 2011; Kılıç, 2013; Vicente, 2013). While we were comparing them, we realized that our children were also comparing them. Our daughters were making statements such as "the garden of our school in the US was green, there were squirrels and ducks, we took our books and had lessons on the grass". When we asked them how it was in Türkiye, they said "there were concrete gardens and no animals or greenery". In fact, my younger daughter said that "in elementary school, because the school garden was made of stone, when she fell on the ground during recess, her knee hurt and bled", and she said that "nothing would have happened to my knee in America". Another sad memory of my daughter was that "while playing in the schoolyard, she fell down and broke the edge of her upper front tooth. She reminded me of this and said that if I had fallen in American schools, I would never have broken my tooth". This is an event that is engraved in our memories as an event that makes us very sad. The gardens of schools in Türkiye are not adequate in terms of physical and landscape features in some researches (Akgül-Gök, 2012; Aksoy, 2011; Algan, 2008; Arslan-Muhacir and Yavuz-

Özalp, 2011; Ata, 2016; Huz, 2015; Malkoç, 2014; Özaktan, 2014; Özdemir and Yılmaz, 2009; Vural, 2016; Yılmaz, 2010; Yılmaz, 2012 etc.).

The school buildings built in Türkiye, the stone and cold floors and the concrete walls made of iron bars actually created an antipathy in children. We realized this when we came to America. So much so that many children in Türkiye were deprived of such a right. And this was imposed as if it was normal. However, when people saw something better and safer, they had the opportunity to compare. When the interiors of the buildings were examined, the differences were still noticeable. Clean and spacious corridors, multi-purpose conference halls, sports halls, spacious and bright classrooms clearly revealed the difference. Examples of the interiors of buildings in America are given in Figures 6-7.

Picture 6-7.

Classroom and School hall



As seen in Figures 6-7, children are educated in a clean, hygienic, and safe environment. Each school has a gym, workshops, multipurpose halls, and cafeterias. In Türkiye, when gyms are generally evaluated in schools, it is seen that they are only concentrated in high schools and are rarely found in other types of schools. Multipurpose halls are not found in all schools. Cafeterias and canteens are found in all schools; they are established for commercial purposes. They act as a grocery store, open from morning to evening, not just at noon as in America.

Another noteworthy aspect of schools in America is that in addition to being almost one story, school buildings have 4-5 exit doors. This situation provides children with alternatives in case of fire, earthquake, or other possible threats. In schools in Türkiye, we have seen that in addition to having only one or at most two exit doors, the height of the building affects school security. It does not give children a chance to escape and be safe in any disaster. In fact, this situation was experienced in drills in Türkiye when children tried to get down from the 4th or 5th floor by pushing each other while evacuating the school building. In fact, our little girl jumped in and said, "We only did one drill in Türkiye. In this drill, all the children were pushing each other, there was chaos. However, in America, we do regular drills every month and the siren is on. Why do we do more drills here? The school is one story anyway and there are many doors." When she said this, we sensed that she was also disturbed by the situation in Türkiye. If we examine the meals that students eat at school, we see that in America, fast food is always served with milk, fruit, fruit juice, etc. Examples of school meals in America are given in Figure 8.

Picture 8.

Lunches



As seen in Picture 8, although there is fast food in the meals, an attempt is made to provide balance with products containing vitamins such as milk, fruit, and fruit juice. In addition, Muslim and Jewish students do not eat pork in schools and there are different preferences for vegetarian students. School meals are offered to students for very small fees depending on the income level of the families. In addition, students are given a free breakfast. This includes products such as cake, milk, and raisins. In Türkiye, lunches are served to students in the form of stews and rice-pasta, fruit, or salad. Lunches are not available in other schools except for state boarding schools and schools with a transportation system (which are free in these types of schools). There is no breakfast in schools in Türkiye. Each individual eats whatever they want for lunch.

In America, students cannot go to the canteen or cafeteria between classes. Eating is only done during lunch, and the cafeteria closes after lunch. However, in Türkiye, the canteen or cafeteria is open during breaks and all day long, and the child can buy whatever food and drink they want for money. Although it is monitored, sometimes unhealthy products can be sold. For this reason, the lunch hour application in America is a more rational application.

The basic concepts of good/healthy nutrition are; sufficiency, balance, calorie control, control, and variety (Hatun, 2002). Adequate nutrition, which is one of the most important factors contributing to the maintenance or achievement of good health, is meeting all of people's nutritional needs. (Akyuz, 2016). Especially for children, who are in the most important and fastest period of physical and mental development, nutrition is of great importance in terms of living a better-quality life in terms of physical and social aspects today and in the future (Candaş et al. 2011; Yabancı, 2011).

Children spend a large part of their time outside the home in school environments. Schools are also places where physical and cognitive activities are intensified and the individual's nutritional needs increase due to this intensification. Based on this need, schools should not only be places where balanced and healthy nutrition is explained to children theoretically; they should also be places where healthy eating habits are acquired through the provision of this service (Ministry of National Education, 2023). Inadequate nutrition not only affects children's mental and physical development; It also negatively affects their social lives (Konuk-Şener and Ocakçı, 2014). Free or low-cost nutrition programs in the US are important steps for the development of students. It can be said that the No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act laws support this.

In America, students would stand up and put their hands on their hearts and read the "Pledge of Allegiance" on TV every morning before class. The meaning of this was quite valuable ("I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."), it was a statement placed in the subconscious to raise good citizens and good people. I liked this very much. When my daughters came home on the first day of school in America, they said that "the children in our school put their hands on their hearts and memorized the poem read on TV". When we asked Mrs. Y about this later, she said it was the Pledge of Allegiance. In Türkiye, a flag ceremony is held every Monday morning before class and every Friday evening after class, and the importance of the national anthem and the flag and the need to be respected are reminded from time

to time. In addition, our national anthem is sung at the beginning of official programs. This is done to instill love for the flag and country and to create citizenship awareness.

In America, students go directly to their classes in the morning or on certain days of the week without any ceremony or gathering in the school yard. However, in Türkiye, it is mandatory to gather in the school yard on Monday mornings and Friday evenings to hold the national anthem ceremony (the national anthem is sung, and announcements are made during these ceremonies), and on other days, it is up to the school administrators to line up in the school yard. At first, my daughters found it strange not to gather in the school yard and not to sing the national anthem, but over time they realized that this practice is not the same in America as it is in Türkiye.

In America, school administrators, teachers or students would address the advisory class hours from the television or smart board in the classrooms. In these announcements, important events of the day, things to do, birthdays, and competitions were announced to the students. My younger daughter came home one day happily, she said that "she had heard her name on the TV screen in the morning because it was her birthday, and then the other children in her class celebrated her birthday". This was actually a small factor in increasing her sense of belonging to the school. Another anecdote is that my older daughter's birthday fell on a weekend, and her advisory teacher had made a video to celebrate her birthday. Another year, a free check to be used at a famous bakery in the city we live in was sent to our mailbox by the teachers, and another free check for my older daughter to eat pizza on her birthday. In Türkiye, school administrators or teachers do not celebrate children's birthdays, and there are no practices such as gifts.

Another practice I liked in America was that there were water fountains in certain places in the school. When I wanted to buy a water bottle for my daughter, she said "there was no need, there were water fountains everywhere. When children were thirsty, they would drink water from the water fountains that were sterilized from time to time". Unfortunately, there is no such application as a water fountain in Türkiye. Children take water bottles with them or drink water from the toilet sinks. I have experienced that the application in America is healthier in terms of hygiene. Transportation to school is provided by yellow buses. There is a picture of yellow buses in Picture 9.

Picture 9.

Transportation to school



As seen in Picture 9, students in America are transported to school by yellow buses. Yellow buses pick up children from certain points close to their homes and drop them off after school. The free transportation of students to their schools is within the scope of the right to education. In fact, this right is also expressed as the right to access education in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The fact that students are transported and this service is free of charge to provide them with "Equal Opportunities and Possibilities" so that they can access education is an indication that children are valued. It was my daughters' first day at school in America. I got my daughters on the bus from the yellow bus stop in the morning. But that day was endless for me. I had so many questions in my mind, such as "What did they do, did they have a hard time, did they make friends, could they understand

the courses, could they communicate with the teachers? Did they eat the food?...” When we want time to pass, it passes very slowly; if we don’t want it to pass, it passes very slowly. I had experienced this situation very well that day. It was time to end school. I went to the school bus stop where I picked up the children. The bus came to the stop across the street, but our girls didn’t get off. I started crying. What did they do, did they miss the bus? I was worried. While I was trying to call Mrs. Y, 10 minutes later the same bus had gone all the way to the end of the street and returned. And it stopped in front of me. My girls got off the bus. I was very happy at that moment. The children had seen me at the stop across the street and waved, but I hadn’t noticed”. The rule on yellow buses is that children are dropped off at the same stop in the evening as they were picked up in the morning. I understood this rule very well that day. I understood how much importance was given to the safety of children in every moment we experienced it. Because when yellow buses stopped, traffic on the street stopped, and when they started, vehicles started moving. It was forbidden to overtake yellow buses and there were big fines.

When a school bus is dropping off or picking up students, a driver must stop when encountering a school bus. When a school bus driver is preparing to stop the bus, he or she will turn on four yellow warning lights, two in front of the bus and two in the back. The warning lights continue to flash until the bus comes to a complete stop. When the bus comes to a complete stop, the yellow lights stop flashing and the four red lights (two in front and two in back) begin flashing as children board or exit the bus. The bus may also have a stop arm that automatically extends under the window on the left side of the bus. Even if there is no stop arm, the other driver must still stop. All traffic approaching the bus from either direction must stop at least 10 feet from the front or back of the bus and must stop until the bus starts moving or the bus driver signals for drivers to continue. School bus drivers who believe a driver has illegally passed a stopped bus should report the driver’s license plate number and the scene to law enforcement. These are a set of rules designed to keep children safe in traffic. In Türkiye, students are transported to school in white minibuses called school buses. This is completely up to the parent. Because school transportation is paid and the state does not finance transportation. Children of families whose homes are far away either use public transportation, paid service vehicles, or the family’s own means or walk to and from school. In Türkiye, free transportation of students to school is only provided for the purpose of transporting children in small settlements such as villages and towns to schools in the centers. Apart from this service, there is no free school transportation service. In Türkiye, there are no serious traffic regulations for yellow buses or school service vehicles like in America. There is no such thing as drivers being within 10 feet of school services while they are passing or stopping. This situation actually threatens the safety of the child.

There are also statements regarding the right to education and the safety of children in Articles 28 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 2 of the Protocol 1 Additional to the European Convention on Human Rights, and Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UNICEF 2018). As stated by Akyüz (2016); without education, people cannot take care of their health, protect themselves and their families properly, work productively, or live a culturally rich life. When the issue is considered in terms of society as a whole, failure to adequately realize individuals’ right to education harms democracy, social development, international peace, and security. Therefore, it is pleasing that the aforementioned right is included in the content at a higher rate than other rights. While the meeting between parents and teachers in the US is called a parent meeting in Türkiye, it is known as teacher-parents’ conferences in the US. When my daughters’ ESOL teacher in the US sent an email asking if we wanted to make an appointment for a teacher-parent conference, we couldn’t understand at first. “Was this a training or a seminar? When I wrote that we couldn’t understand, she said that it was a kind of meeting to discuss the child’s situation and that the parents should attend with the child”. However, in Türkiye, parent meetings are held on weekends and children do not attend the meetings. There are two types of parent meetings in Türkiye. All parents of the class wait for the teachers in the child’s classroom and the teachers come and share the child’s situation with the whole parents. The second type is when the teacher sits in a certain classroom and the parents come in one by one and share the child’s situation. The parent meeting system in the US involves creating a common roadmap with the parents and all the teachers in terms of the child’s development.

Parent meetings are held to ensure cooperation between the school, family, and teachers, to inform parents about the developmental stages and academic status of the students, to ensure that they take ownership of the school and to actively include them in educational services. These meetings work to improve education, increase school, and student success; improve the school environment and correct student behavior (Kıral, 2022). Although parent meetings are held in both Türkiye and America, I believe that the system in America is more organized and therefore more beneficial for the child. When we attended the meetings of our girls in America, it was positively received that our children were respectful and greeted their teachers when they saw them, and we were proud when they expressed this to us. Similarly, the words of praise used by our girls by their teachers in our presence made them happy. I can talk about these meetings as one of the best examples of the three pillars of the child-parent-school working together.

Another issue regarding schools in America was that I could not go to my child's school without an appointment. If you do not have an appointment, the school does not accept you unless it is a very important event. In Türkiye, parent appointments are rarely practiced. In fact, in primary schools, parents enter the classroom by knocking on the door of the teacher without permission, stealing the time of the teacher and the students for individual matters.

In America, we also couldn't enter the school if you had no appointment. None of the existing doors of the school could be opened from the outside. When you came to school and rang the school camera doorbell, the secretary would see you, ask who you had an appointment with, and if the teacher accepted, the school building's door would open automatically. At first, this practice seemed strange to us. But when we were told about a previous incident where a person entered the school and killed, and injured students, we saw how justified the practice was. In Türkiye, the school doors are open to everyone, the person in charge of the reception desk only takes your name, and you can enter the school as you wish. In fact, this situation can sometimes lead to dangerous situations. During my years as a teacher, a parent who entered the school as she wished got angry with the teacher and threw her bag on the teacher's head. In America, there is also a school dog practice for security purposes. This is one of the practices I really like. There is no such situation in Türkiye.

In schools in America, children do not wear school uniforms. Students go to school in free clothes. They can only wear special clothes on certain days. For example, yellow day, hat day, pajama day, ugly sweater day, Halloween costumes, Christmas costumes etc. These practices are adopted and implemented by all staff, including teachers. In America, "my daughters' teachers told the children that they could come in pajamas the next day. I was angry with my daughters because we did not know the dress code culture in America. Do you go to school in pajamas? You exaggerated the casual dress code. Later, when I received an e-mail from the school about this issue, I realized that this was a practice, and my daughters and I laughed a lot about it". In Türkiye, students are required to wear school uniforms. Uniforms that include the school name and logo are especially requested. The reason for the situation in Türkiye is actually to create equality among students. It is a practice implemented so that material inequalities are not noticed.

In America, there was no recess for children to rest between class changes. A certain period of time was given between classes to get their belongings from their lockers. Also, since each teacher's classroom was different in America, children used the space in between to go to their classrooms. However, in Türkiye, children run, play, and rest during break time. However, the system in America seemed more rational to me. Because each teacher had their own classroom. Since their classrooms had relevant materials, wall posters, educational materials, and course tools, they could provide a better education. However, in Türkiye, teachers do not have their own classrooms and students have a specific class. Teachers carry their lesson materials to the classrooms. My little daughter has a memory of changing classes in America. It was when we first went to America. "My daughter took her textbooks from her locker and was going to her classroom. It was a choir class. There were three different groups of choir classes at the same time. My daughter went to the choir class of a class and sat in it. She listened until the end of the lesson, but since she did not have full command of English, she could not understand that she was in a different group. That day, the teacher left the roll call to the end of the lesson. At the end of the lesson, your name was not on the list, could you bring your schedule, the

teacher said to my daughter. When my daughter showed the program to the teacher, it turned out that she was a student in the choir class next door". When my daughter came home that day, "she shared with us how embarrassed she was and how disadvantaged it was to not have a fluent the language". I think many immigrant children experience similar situation.

There is no such practice in America as teachers and school administrators being on duty. All teachers go to the door during class changes to ensure the safety of children. During lunch break, school administrators eat with students in the school cafeteria. In Türkiye, teachers have a duty of duty during break times and lunch times to ensure the safety of children. They receive extra fees for this (Kıral and Karaman Kepenekci, 2018). In return for the extra courses they receive, teachers on duty keep students under control by visiting corridors and certain areas during break times and prevent possible physical and psychological violence between students (Posluoğlu, 2014). The purpose of the duty of teachers on duty in schools is to ensure that teachers enter classes on time, to report problems with cleaning, heating, electricity, and plumbing in the school to the school administration, to check students in places designated by the school administration (Ayyıldız, 2015) and thus to ensure the safety of students (Ayyıldız and Akin, 2016). The time periods when children are at the most risk in school are break times. Break times are the must-have breaks in schools. The primary duty of protecting children during these hours falls on the duty teachers (Kıral and Karaman Kepenekçi, 2018). In America, children's course performances are assessed through process evaluation. In short, children receive points for every work they do. Grades are Grade A, Grade B, Grade C, Grade D, Grade F (Below 60%). Children's grades can exceed 100 full points with extra credits and studies. Evaluating the child during the process pushes them to work more regularly. However, in Türkiye, a final evaluation is performed. two or three written exams are given from the courses and the grade they receive is entered into the system. In addition, although in-class performance grades are given, they do not work as regularly as the system in America. An example of a process evaluation that my younger daughter did in one of her classes in America and that I received from the system is given in Picture 10.

Picture 10. *Process of evaluation examples of my daughter*

08/16/2021	8-Year-Old Ella Neumark	Grade: D (9/14 = 64.29%)
08/17/2021	Commonly Confused Words	Grade: A (20/20 = 100%)
08/20/2021	Note Check: Punctuation	Grade: A (5/5 = 100%)
08/20/2021	Unit 1 Vocabulary: Pictures	Grade: A (10/10 = 100%)
08/20/2021	Unit 1 Vocabulary Quiz	Grade: A (10/10 = 100%)
08/20/2021	Unit 1 Vocabulary Working w/ Words	Grade: A (10/10 = 100%)
08/27/2021	Punctuation Review 1	Grade: A (10/10 = 100%)
08/30/2021	Nightmare in Yellow	Grade: A (11/11 = 100%)
08/30/2021	Unit 2 Vocabulary Quiz A	Grade: A (22/20 = 110%)
08/30/2021	Vocabulary Unit 2: Working w/ Words	Grade: A (10/10 = 100%)
09/02/2021	Note Check: Quotation Marks	Grade: A (5/5 = 100%)
09/03/2021	Punctuation Review 2	Grade: C (7/10 = 70%)
09/03/2021	Unit 2 Vocabulary Quiz B	Grade: A (20/20 = 100%)
09/03/2021	Vocabulary Unit 2: Crossword	Grade: A (5/5 = 100%)
09/03/2021	Vocabulary Unit 2: Pictures	Grade: A (10/10 = 100%)
09/09/2021	Note Check	Grade: A (5/5 = 100%)
09/09/2021	Punctuation Review 3	Grade: A (10/10 = 100%)
09/10/2021	TedTalk: Tim Urban: Procrastination	Grade: B (8/10 = 80%)
09/10/2021	Vocabulary Unit 3 Review: CrossWord	Grade: A (5/5 = 100%)
09/10/2021	Vocabulary Unit 3 Review: MultiChoice Context	Grade: A (5/5 = 100%)
09/10/2021	Vocabulary Unit 3 Review: Pictures	Grade: A (6/6 = 100%)
09/10/2021	Vocabulary Unit 3 Review: Working w/ Words	Grade: A (10/10 = 100%)
09/10/2021	Vocabulary Unit 3: Quiz A	Grade: A (30/30 = 100%)

As seen in Picture 10, evaluation is homework, projects, in-class work, presentations, exams, and every work they do or do not do are graded. In America, children could choose classes other than basic classes according to their talents and interests. For example, our daughters chose an orchestra class for three years because she knew playing the violin. They chose painting and choir because of her interest in art and music. There were no classes imposed on the child, the child was completely autonomous in choosing classes. This actually allowed them to take ownership of the school and the activities they did. There was no program that was low in number and variety of classes, which would tire the children. However, in Türkiye, there was a lot of variety and number of classes. This caused the children to get bored. The classes imposed on the children under the name of elective classes varied according to the teacher at the school or the imposition of the school administration. The situation in Türkiye can actually be called compulsory-elective classes.

Another thing I liked about America is that social events are organized every quarter. Choir concerts, orchestra concerts, theater can be given as examples. Students have the chance to put on their performances four times a year without waiting for the end of the year. Schools have multi-purpose

halls and gyms. Since my daughters play the violin, they had violin concerts four times a year. This had increased their self-confidence. In Türkiye, some schools only organize programs at the end of the year. Apart from this, a program is prepared on national holidays, even if not every student takes part. Another thing that caught my attention in America is that the same classes take place at the same time every day. For example, the child's first lesson every day is social studies. The child takes the same lesson at the same time for five days. The fact that the location of the classes does not change prevents chaos. However, since the day and time of each class change in Türkiye, students who are not responsible enough may not bring lesson materials by making excuses such as forgetting a notebook or a book. In America, courses are taught on computers. For this reason, Chromebooks are given to students for free or for a very small fee. Children are subscribed to educational sites and can benefit from many sites related to their courses or personal development for free. Games, presentations, videos related to their courses... Hotspot passwords are also given to students who have internet and financial problems at home and are encouraged to do their courses. Teaching lessons on computers allows the student to increase their 21st century skills and lighten their school bags and burden. Children make presentations, prepare bibliographies, carry out team activities and volunteer activities. There is feedback for every activity the children do. Teachers do not only use a direct narration method, but they also use different teaching methods and techniques. The aim is to ensure that the child adapts to the age where artificial intelligence and information technologies are used. In Türkiye, there is no practice such as a computer or hotspot. Courses are taught by teachers using direct narration. There are only smart boards in the classrooms, and teachers use them in the courses. Another application in Türkiye is that the state provides free textbooks to all students in the context of the right to education and equal opportunities. Free textbooks are given to children with financial difficulties and even to private school students at the beginning of each academic year. Although this is good practice, it is not actually appropriate to give free textbooks to private school students. Since private schools teach their courses according to their own programs, they have their parents buy the appropriate books for them. Thus, they do not use the free books provided by the state.

Another thing that caught my attention in America was that every school had a nurse. The nurse sends information and requests regarding children's vaccinations, eye, and dental checkups directly to the parents, and follows up on issues related to the child's health. When necessary, the parents are contacted by phone. "When my older daughter had an upset stomach at school one day, the school nurse asked if she had eaten breakfast, and when she learned that she had, she kept her under surveillance for one lesson. When she realized that there was no problem, my daughter returned to her lesson". However, there is no such thing as a school nurse in Türkiye. When something happens to a child, the parent is called, and if they have permission, they are taken to the doctor. In order to achieve a healthy society, it is imperative that health promotion activities are carried out in schools (Bahar, 2010). School nurses provide services to both students and school staff in matters such as emergency response, health education, consultancy services on health issues, case management, conducting school entrance examinations and vaccinations, creating a safe environment, providing care, education and consultancy services to individuals with chronic diseases, and when necessary, conduct health promotion programs in cooperation with local governments (Akgül and Ergün, 2021; Barış and Yolcu, 2018). For the reasons I have listed, school nurses are needed in schools.

Lessons learned from the US

My lessons learned from the US are explained below:

Cultural Blindness: My life in America made me discover that I was culturally blind in my career as a parent and an educator. I don't brag about it—I even admit it, but I say it is part of my cultural journey. In America, school education is conducted differently than in Türkiye. Just experiencing the education in my own country made me feel that I was ignoring the differences. It actually helped me better understand the people who came to my country for education, my university students, and empathize with them. Although I knew that there was a world and education system outside of my country, living it, breathing that atmosphere and culture was completely different. It made me perceive the problems in my country better and see that the children in my country were unlucky in many ways, even though I knew about the problems in the education system.

Cultural bias: I had prejudices about the American education system and culture. My prejudice was that there would be racism at school, and that my children and I would be belittled because of our language deficiencies. However, neither my children nor I ever encountered the racism I feared. People were very respectful and kind to us. But this was not just the case for us, it was for all students. There was also no belittlement regarding language. My children took the ESOL class in their first year and by the end of their first year, they passed the relevant exams and received equal education with American children. The fact that people from many different nations lived in America normalized linguistic differences and accents. The most important thing was that the children understood what was being said, were hardworking and respectful.

Cultural Proficiency: When people are culturally competent, they see, understand, accept and respect differences (Kıral, 2018; Lindsey et al., 2018). I discovered different cultures and communication types in America. I realized how polite it is to smile and say good day to even a stranger. However, in Türkiye, smiling at someone you don't know means establishing a relationship with them or means different things. I also understood that the concept of private space is very different from what I saw. I learned how important it is to send e-mails, answer e-mails, give feedback, be sensitive to the concept of appointments, and private space concept. I understood the flaws and deficiencies in the Turkish education system more clearly. I understood how much importance is given to children and their safety from school buildings, activities and their lives.

Cultural awareness: Awareness is a term used to indicate the extent to which people are aware of their own attitudes and behaviors (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2014; Kıral, 2008). My experiences in America helped me better understand and notice the situation of immigrants in my country and students at the higher education institution where I worked. I can say that I am a more sensitive educator, especially since my cultural awareness and empathy skills have improved since I returned to Türkiye.

Cultural empathy: The act of empathy is completed by the person momentarily and temporarily leaving their own identity aside and assuming the identity of the other person, looking at events from the other person's perception and then returning to their own identity. In this respect, the act of empathy begins with the person first getting to know the individual in front of them (Yağbasan and Demirbağ, 2017) and their responsibilities to fulfill (Kıral, 2015). It is possible to get to know individuals through the structural similarities of a community or their shared historical past. These people with similar characteristics can feel the empathic situations they witness at some point in their development and can be conditioned to these situations. For example, they may witness similar or different distressing experiences (pain, fear, loss, separation) that are directly related to them. Although these situations involve cultural differences, they are universal empathy-provoking situations. Possible cultural differences can change the frequency and extent to which individuals experience different types of distress in these processes, depending on the degree of involvement in the events (Hoffman 2000). As I lived in American culture, I realized that I actually reacted to similar events like them. This is clear evidence that my empathy is shaped by that culture.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Life is a collection of stories. The stories in our lives are the product of our experiences. Sometimes we share our experiences with our environment by telling them. As storytellers, we are actually autoethnographers with this approach. This autoethnography gave me the opportunity to think about my life experiences, write my stories, question and criticize them. Therefore, I learned to get a better education from my experiences in the US. Thanks to my observations, learnings and cultural competence, my entire perspective and prejudices changed. I learned the impact of quality and safe education on my children. I also learned more about cultural differences. I also understood cultural and educational differences better. These are related to safe life and school life, personal space, communication, cultural empathy, cultural blindness and respect for differences. I realized the importance of cultural tolerance in serving refugee and immigrant students, who are my educator identity. In addition, my parenting story was also affected, my cultural and educational journey changed my mindset and the lens through which I look at the world. My cultural and educational journey actually allowed me to have a different mindset and world and to question it. Observing culture and education

in their own environments requires time, enthusiasm and curiosity. Sometimes photographers wait for the natural events they expect to see, waiting for the right time. Other times they remain inactive, forced to turn back to achieve their goals. I believe the same is true for cultural competence. The process of achieving cultural competence and becoming more empathetic parents and educators requires patience, learning, and intentionality. As our schools become more diverse due to internal and external migration, it is essential that educators develop cultural competence and support diversity to ensure the success and well-being of all students. This culture of respect is also important for families to learn. The educational systems and cultures of countries require respect, tolerance, safety, and responsibility for differences. This is reflected in the design of the educational system. Based on the lessons I learned during my time in the US, I recommend that policymakers and practitioners prioritize cultural competence and its ongoing theme in their professional training. It is recommended that family education programs be organized, and schools increase their activities to ensure that families are together and that a culture of respect is instilled in children. In order to prioritize the deficiencies in the Turkish education system and the best interests of the child and to ensure its compliance with the Turkish education system, the outputs of different education systems can be examined, and it may be beneficial for Türkiye to take more precautions for a safer education and increase the share allocated to education from the budget. Future studies can be conducted to understand the practices in other cultures and education systems and to provide better quality services to students in underdeveloped or developing countries.

Disclosure Statements

Conflict of Interest

As the author, I declare that there is no financial or non-financial conflict of interest that could influence this study.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

The author contributed 100% to this study.

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