

Supporting teacher-research: the work of Kenan Dikilitaş and teachers at Gediz University, Izmir¹

Richard Smith

I first met Kenan Dikilitaş at an IATEFL Teacher Training and Education SIG symposium on 'Researching Teachers' in February 2012 in Istanbul, Turkey. In my own talk I had been arguing that teacher-research is valuable and viable as a means for in-service professional development, despite the difficulties involved, and I had suggested some ways practising teachers can be supported to engage with and in research. Kenan came up to me afterwards in a state of some excitement and talked to me about the approach he'd been adopting as professional development coordinator in the English Preparatory School at Gediz University in Izmir. Rather than providing conventional kinds of top-down teacher training input, which - we both agreed - can tend to deny teachers' autonomy, he had been encouraging his teachers to reflect on issues in their classrooms, read published research and do action research projects, thereby taking more control over their own development. This was the second year of the experiment, he explained, and the first time he'd really come across any external validation for his approach. Would I be interested in visiting Gediz when I next came to Turkey and seeing for myself what he was doing?

I certainly was interested, as this kind of attempt to incorporate teacher-research within a teacher development programme is still relatively rare, and, I thought, absolutely worth supporting. I was in Izmir in April 2012 and went to talk to Kenan then, to learn more about how he had come to adopt this innovative approach to professional development (my recording of our conversation forms the basis for most of my report here). I also sat in on a presentation by one of the teachers (they all meet together every week for 40 minutes, and Kenan combines this with one-to-one meetings during the rest of the week).

According to Kenan, the idea of promoting engagement with and in research as the main teacher development activity at Gediz came from his own overall learning experience, and from a resulting belief that people should discover relevant knowledge for themselves

rather than expect to be 'fed' with it. In linguistics courses he had taken at university he was struck by the notion that 'children construct their own grammar' - reaffirming his emerging belief that we all construct our own knowledge. He had heard of action research and was attracted to it as it seemed consistent with this underlying philosophy, but he hadn't, he admitted, known a lot about it when he first proposed it as the approach to professional development he would like to engage in when he first started working at Gediz.

In his first sessions (in September 2010) with the 40-45 teachers he was responsible for, he talked to them about his beliefs about teacher-learning, saying he would not be prescribing to them how to teach but instead wanted them to engage in discussions. The initial reaction, as he recalls, was one of surprise that he would not be providing a more top-down form of training. Some reacted negatively, questioning this way of proceeding and referring to the way their friends teaching on preparatory programmes elsewhere were being trained.

But Kenan didn't give up. He continued with some discussions of advantages and disadvantages of teacher-research, stressing the value of collecting data to gain insights into your own classroom, and giving examples from books by Anne Burns and Michael Wallace. He had to struggle, though, due to some teachers' continuing perceptions that teacher training should be more fun and entertaining, based on their previous experience of CELTA-style sessions. Kenan told the teachers: "You don't have to do research. All you have to do is come to professional development sessions once a week and present at some point on something - this could just be a summary of something you've read and your opinions about it." He also led a session on determining an interest area or topic, stressing that this should be something the teacher doesn't know about, related to their own teaching. He asked participants to list three problematic areas in their own teaching. Then he invited them to come to see him in his office, to share their topics.

Teachers at Gediz, as in preparatory programmes at most universities in Turkey, have little free time, so they tended to come to see Kenan during breaks, either just dropping in or making an appointment in advance. He never attempted to change a teacher's selected topics. Kenan and the teacher would search for relevant articles together on the Internet and he would print the articles out for them. When a teacher seemed ready, Kenan would ask them to present at the weekly session about what they had found from their reading and/or to present a proposal for collecting data about their topic. A favoured kind of presentation in the early stages was reading articles on a topic and expressing an opinion about them, for example about how video materials can be used in the classroom. Gradually, also, Kenan began to give all teachers some basic research methods

¹ This piece is adapted from the Foreword to Dikilitaş, K. (ed.). (2013).

training about questionnaires, interviews and observations.

One by one, then, the teachers started to present, on Tuesdays at 4pm, for about 40 minutes. Kenan might comment on the teacher's powerpoints in advance, showing them how to make the slides more concise (since there was a tendency to include much too much at first) – but he was careful never to comment negatively about a teachers' presentation or research proposal – this would have discouraged the teachers, who were just 'finding their way'.

Indeed, an informal atmosphere was encouraged. For some of the teachers, however, even coming once a week was a burden – time was a major constraining factor, even then.

Given the difficult beginning that he described to me, it is a somewhat amazing fact – and a testament to the increasing commitment and hard work of all the teachers, and of Kenan himself – that little over one year after the beginning of the experiment, in November 2011, a book of 22 reports of action research as well as critical reviews of literature by Gediz teachers was brought out by the Ankara-based publisher Nobel. Titled *Teacher-research Studies at Foreign Language School: Inquiries from Teacher Perspectives* and edited by Kenan Dikilitaş himself for the Gediz University Academic and Professional Development Office, this book arose from the first, relatively small-scale Gediz Action Research Conference, spread over two days (June 17th and July 1st 2011), which was arranged just for teachers from within the institution. A very impressive total of 27 teachers presented on their teacher-research and almost all of them wrote up their presentations in the form of written reports for the 2011 book. As Kenan remarks, some of the teachers have been so empowered by the experience of presenting and writing that they are now looking to get work published in journals, and several of them have presented on their work at other conferences. Most of the teachers now seem to see the value of doing research – if only to add to their CV by getting a paper published or presenting at a conference. In addition to this, however, Kenan perceives that many have developed an intrinsic interest and a shift in identity – from being 'just instructors' they now see themselves as researchers.

Some aspects of the Gediz approach to teacher-research as this has developed are, I think, worth drawing out of the above account for their possible relevance elsewhere. Firstly, Kenan was quite thick-skinned in pushing ahead to realize his vision despite initial resistance, and such forcefulness might indeed be necessary in other contexts when existing expectations are for a more conventional 'pre-packaged', 'commodified' version of teacher training, as might be the case in Turkish university preparatory programmes generally. Secondly, it was noticeable from my interview

with him that Kenan saw value in not judging or commenting too much on teachers' own ideas and plans, preferring to put the emphasis on teachers' finding their way for themselves. The issue of degree of guidance and degree of freedom to 'allow' to teachers (relating also to the issue of how much guidance to give *before* teachers begin their research, and how much can be given 'at the point of need') is an important one for all mentors of practitioner research to consider, and is probably resolvable only with reference to needs in a particular context. Kenan's own approach involved making himself available for consultation at times convenient for teachers (even via mobile phone when necessary), and his ongoing presence as mentor on the spot, *in* the institution, must have been one of the major factors in the success of the project, given that teachers' busyness is so frequently cited as a barrier to teacher-research, in any context. Another key to the developing success of this project may have been the way not too much pressure was put on teachers to be 'perfect' or to fit conventional academic standards of research. Again, considerable tolerance has been shown towards teachers finding their own way.

Talking with Kenan in April 2012 was enlightening indeed, and I had a chance to witness his and Gediz teachers' achievement further for myself when I attended their second Action Research Conference in July 2012, as one of the keynote speakers. This time there were teachers visiting from some other Izmir institutions, and the conference was altogether larger in scale. Teachers gave confident presentations of their research, and most of them have written up their talks for presentation in a second impressive volume of reports of teacher-research, which came out earlier this year (Dikilitaş 2013).

By summer 2012 I think I had become a kind of critical friend to Kenan (mentors, after all, can benefit from mentoring themselves from time to time!), and a few weeks after the conference he and I talked some more, this time in relation to how he/we might research his teacher development practice more systematically. My contribution to this, as a kind of baseline or starting-point for work in the third year (2012-13) was to volunteer to elicit teachers' evaluations of the two years that had gone by, evaluations which they could perhaps share with me as an outsider in a way they would not necessarily be able to share so freely with Kenan. My thematic analysis of respondents' perceptions revealed the following disadvantages of action research in this context (each matched against a representative quotation):

- 1) Workload / lack of time ("Most of us are busy teachers. Sometimes we can have heavy teaching load. Action research requires time, attention, and investigation. For a reasonable research, you have to focus deeply on your study. As a result, the teaching

load and the research could be quite tiring at the same time for teachers.”)

2) Need for more preparation or other ‘support’ / concerns about quality (“After this year’s presentations, I realized that the results were somehow forced. I really wouldn’t want to say that but some of them were perfunctory. My belief in the academic value of making an AR project was damaged.”)

3) Modular system / inappropriateness of classes (“The change of the classes that the modular system required. It means that you initiate the study with the identified classes but you have little chance to continue with the same students or the same module.”)

4) Compulsory nature (‘I believe it shouldn’t be compulsory’) – mentioned by one respondent

As this shows, difficulties and criticisms persist, indeed they will probably never go away, even if ways can be thought of to address some of them. Overall, however, the written comments I received were extremely positive, and I shall end with my thematic analysis of the advantages of action research as perceived by Gediz teachers engaged in it at the end of the second year of innovative teacher-research. Again, a representative quotation is provided for each emerging theme:

* Action research links theory and practice (‘Theory and practice were in the same direction throughout the study’)

* Improvement in teaching abilities (“It was helpful for me to improve myself. It helped me to detect problems in the classroom.”)

* Increase in self-reliance (“Action research allows us to address a problem which needs to be solved. I’m now more competent at investigating and finding solutions to the problems that I have found out.”)

* Increase in self-awareness (“[I was] forced to look critically at myself as a teacher and really explor[e] how I can improve. So it helped me see myself more clearly.”)

* It provides new perspectives (“Action research [...] lets us have a more detailed perspective on learners and you become more aware of your students’ needs and learning styles.”)

* It gives a sense of development / is a source of motivation (“The AR program could enable me to see the improvement I could reach in my profession.”)

* It Increases student self-awareness / confidence in teachers (“The students were more aware of [...] what they were learning and they could rely more on the teachers and the institution due to [this].”)

* it increases ability to research / develops identity as a researcher (“Apart from identifying problems, I have learnt how to gather and evaluate the data.”)

Ever since we first met almost two years ago, Kenan has been very open to hearing advice and receiving critical comment from me, and I have gained much from becoming more involved, as a kind of insider-outsider. It seems to me that the Gediz experiment is going from strength to strength, gathering momentum each year, and I have been very grateful for the opportunity to watch it develop, to become more involved through talking with teachers as well as with Kenan, and to help it along where I can.

References

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