

*International Expansion Strategy of Gülen Inspired Schools Through
Internationalization and Localization*

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Abstract

From the perspective of the educational sciences, globalization is one of the crucial subjects today and several educational movements attempt to open international markets by opening branches or working on cooperations. The Gülen Movement (GM) is one of these movements which has successfully globalized their schools and, thus has become an international educational movement in the last three decades, like the Waldorf and Montessori movements (Alam, 2019, p. 136). The purpose of this study is to examine the globalization of the Gülen Inspired Schools. A qualitative research design is used to study this issue. Semi-structured expert interviews are conducted with managers of the Gülen Inspired Schools and experts on the movement from three continents, such as Europe, Africa, and America. The results show that, initially, globalization strategies, founding, and the success of the Gülen Inspired Schools in different regions of the world are researched. Following the effects of the failed coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016 on the globalization of Gülen Inspired Schools, their current situation, and the future of these schools is discussed with the participants of this study. The results show that Gülen Inspired Schools used internationalization, despite globalization, and localization as a basic strategy throughout their international expansion. Besides, the failed coup also accelerated the global expansion of the movement and forced the movement and their schools to become more international and local. As a result, Gülen Inspired Schools transformed themselves into local schools without losing their international network and practice “global thinking, local acting” philosophy in these institutions.

Keywords: Expert Interview, Gülen Movement, Private Education, Qualitative Research Method, STEM Education

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Introduction

Muhammed Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish thinker, preacher, teacher, and writer is accepted as one of the important characters of Turkey in the 21st century. He has written more than seventy publications such as books, articles, etc. and has conducted thousands of speeches based on religion, Islam and social sciences in the last 52 years (Mercan & Kardaş, 2018, p. 45). He is also the founder of the so-called “Gülen Movement”, which is a civil society movement that arose in the late 1960s in Turkey, initially composed of a loose network of individuals who were inspired by him (Ebaugh & Koç, 2007, p. 540). Today, according to uncertain statistics, more than five to eight million people support his ideas and the followers of the movement are active in different fields such as education, media, business world, helping foundations, and interfaith and intercultural dialogue organizations (Ebaugh & Koç, 2007, p. 540). Among these different fields, it is easy to say that the core activity of the movement is education.

This part could be seen as a vast network of tutoring centers, elementary and secondary schools, math and science academies, colleges and universities that spread from a single institution in Izmir in 1968 to roughly 1,200 schools in 180 different countries by 2016 (Pahl, 2019, p. 17).

In this point, it is difficult to understand the expansion of such a local movement to the whole world. Initially, the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1990-91 and the independence of the Central Asian Republics provided a golden opportunity for Gülen to expand his Hizmet work abroad (Alam, 2019, p. 136). Later, after 2000, the Gülen Movement (GM) founded different educational institutions all over the world from the Far East to the US. The transformation of a national movement to a multinational actor is an interesting task to study. Park (2007, p. 46) highlighted this subject as follows:

Yet its roots are quintessentially Turkish, located in Turkey’s historical baggage, its domestic political circumstances, and in a version of Islam, that arguably has more currency in Turkey than elsewhere. This rich ‘Turkishness’ endows this globally-engaged movement with a paradoxical and sometimes quixotic character.

In this paper this dilemma, the internationalization of the Gülen movement, is analyzed in detail. This is mainly because such a transformation constitutes a good example for other national companies or national actors who attempt to be global player in the international markets, especially in the education and service sector. In addition to that, one of the other goals of this research is to analyze how the movement transformed its national identity, according to the changes in the last three decades and the internationalization process of the Gülen Inspired Schools during the same time period. Especially the effects of modern technology during internationalization are analyzed in this research. Additionally, the results of this study give social scientists who are working on internationalization concrete data and experiences of the movement, which could lead to delving deeper in different aspects of the internationalization.

To achieve the mentioned goals, in addition to content analysis, a qualitative research method was selected in the field study to understand this controversial subject (Babbie, 2004). One of the main reasons for this choice are the research questions which are based on "how" questions. The initial goal of the researcher during the course of his PhD was to analyze the Gülen Inspired Schools in April 2016. However, in July 2016, three months later, the failed coup attempt took place in Turkey and, mainly because of the importance of the event, Erdogan’s political and

educational activities against the movement took an important place in his study as another aspect of the dilemma.

In the data collection part, only the "expert interview" method is available because of the several reasons depending on the controversial structure of the subject. However, expert interview fits very well to this research that helps the researcher to collect high quality data. Participants of this study could be categorized into four groups, which are shown in the table below:

Participant's Code	Participant's Position	Participant's Occupation	Interview Language
USAM1	School Manager (Group1)	Director	Turkish
USAM2	School Manager (Group1)	Computer Engineer - Teacher	Turkish
USAM3	School Manager (Group1)	Teacher	Turkish
EUM1	School Manager (Group1)	Director	Turkish
EUM2	School Manager (Group1)	Teacher	Turkish
EUM3	School Manager (Group1)	Teacher	Turkish
AM1	School Manager (Group1)	Teacher	English
AM2	School Manager (Group1)	Teacher	Turkish
AM3	School Manager (Group1)	Teacher	Turkish
EX1	Follower (Group 2)	Journalist – Writer	Turkish
EX2	Follower (Group 2)	Imam	Turkish
EX3	Follower (Group 2)	Project Manager	Turkish
EX4	Positive-Neutral (Group 3)	Assistant Professor	German
EX5	Positive-Neutral (Group 3)	Writer	German
EX6	Positive-Neutral (Group 3)	Professor	German
EX7	Detractor (Group 4)	Assistant Professor	German
EX8	Detractor (Group 4)	Political Scientist	German
EX9	Detractor (Group 4)	Assistant Professor	Turkish

Table 1: Participants of the Field Study

As it is easy to see in the table, in total, there were 18 structured expert interviews which enables the comparison of different thoughts and understandings and also the comparison of the theory and the practice. The researcher visited nine Gülen Inspired Schools in different continents, the U.S., Europe and Africa (3 schools in each), and conducted countless talks and discussions with teachers, parents and students of these schools. The main reason for choosing these three regions depends on the structure of the Gülen Inspired Schools. During the preparation part of

the field study, it was seen that at the international level the GIS are founded and expanded in developing countries or in the developed countries. The schools in undeveloped countries were either closed after the failed coup attempt, mainly because of the pressure of the Turkish administration, or were in a bad, insecure condition, which is why the researcher preferred to visit to the mentioned regions.

All data was collected in face-to-face semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed so that the detailed analyses can be easily carried out (Merriam, 2009). Mainly because of the actual situation of the movement, the researcher of the study decided to anonymize all the participants' names and institutions and used codes above. To achieve high-quality data during the interviews, all interviews were conducted in the mother tongue of the participants. Participants' mother tongues are German, English, and Turkish in this study (See table above). In the data analysis part, the Maxqda program was used because of its special features and availability and Gläser and Laudel's (2009, p. 203) procedures were followed. Besides, the researcher of the study practiced five general criteria for qualitative researchers, which Mayring (2002) explained in his book, such as procedural documentation, rule structured construction, argumentative interpretation assurance, proximity to the object and communicative validity. Conducting the field study in the mentioned three continents and only one data collection method is available for the research are several important limitations of the study.

Results

One of the core points of the PhD study of the researcher¹ is the international expansion of the Gülen Inspired Schools. Among different strategies, such as globalization, internationalization, glocalization, localization, etc... during the international expansion, the movement initially used internationalization. However, especially after the political disorder in Turkey in 2016, the movement preferred to use localization instead. These strategies are explained in detail.

Internationalization of Gülen Inspired Schools

Several above-mentioned terms like globalization, internationalization, and localization have become very important and popular in the last two decades. Therefore, they are very well known topics today and that is why the author of the study avoids explaining them in detail here. However, it would be better to talk a little more about internationalization because of the relation with the topic. According to Välimaa (2004, p. 29) "Internationalization" is the approach of skeptics towards globalization who maintains that instead of globalization we should be speaking about internationalization, the implication being that global interactions are predominantly taking place between national economies. Similarly, Caruso and Tenorth (2002, p. 19) also stated this point and mentioned that these two terms, globalization and internationalization, have certain contrasts.

On the one hand, "internationalization" stands for a degree of reciprocity and interaction, and even suggests a formal equality of nations as a crucial condition for reception and transformation (not for the production) of cultural and social patterns. On the other hand, the view of the historical peculiarity of the nation as a category of analysis and construction of the social is not particularly promoted. (Caruso & Tenorth, 2002, p. 19)

¹ Altin, M.E. (2020). Internationalization through Localization: Gülen Inspired Schools, PhD Dissertation on Faculty of Philosophy of Heinrich Heine University of Düsseldorf, Düsseldorf: HHU Universität Publikation Server

It is clear to see from this quote, that unlike globalization, all nations and cultures are equal and the same in internationalization, and there will not be any dominant culture or identity.

In practice, Gülen convinced his other followers to go to other former Soviet regions in Central Asia first and they founded the first GIS outside of Turkey (Ebaugh and Koç 2007, p. 542). One of the participants of the field study, (Ex1), was one of the first followers who went to Azerbaijan after the resolution. According to Ex2, after the 2000s, the movement founded schools in all other parts of the world with the same method. Active followers or some teachers and managers who had experience in Turkey were encouraged to move outside of Turkey and they were motivated by the foundation of schools in other countries outside of Turkey. To achieve this goal, these founders cooperated with local people and local administrations during the foundation process. As a result of this process, the movement founded different types of schools according to region by paying attention to the needs and regulations of that region. That is why, during the field study, it was observed that GISs in Africa, Europe and America differentiate from each other.

"And my impression is that the Gülen Movement has understood to work very country specific. [...] The schools, so I think that depending on the countries, you have specific concepts that can be easily combined with the name Gülen Schools or Hizmet Schools [...] What I find very remarkable, is that the Hizmet Movement in Tanzania does not try to run the same education initiatives as in Germany or in America or Holland, yes. [...] It is actually floating in the national system and working on the lack of the national system. And that can be very different in Africa than in Germany." (Ex6)

As it is easy to see, this type of international expansion is clearly internationalization, because the movement or the GISs do not force other local people to accept their methodology and educational understanding based on their religious philosophy or Turkish values in this case, which is common in globalization, instead, they are reshaping their methodology and educational understanding depending on the motivation and needs of the local people in every region through cooperation with local people. The flexible structure of the movement and the current highly-developed technology allow the followers of the movement to realize this strategy with ease. For example, due to the lack of a technological infrastructure, such a practice could not have been realized in the past or it would be very difficult or very expensive in comparison to today. Therefore, other movements and also many companies, like McDonalds or Mercedes, use globalization during the international expansion process which dismisses local differences and presents people the same product in every part of the world. However, the Gülen Movement uses technology and creates a new education model for each different country. That is why it is difficult to talk about just one educational model of the Gülen Movement, instead it is combination of several educational models which have common values or points but also differentiations according to regions. For this reason, all visited schools during the field study are found to be different from each other, especially in different countries, but by looking at their quantitative growth, they are all accepted as a successful school in their regions. It is also observed in participant managers that they all have different perceptions about the Gülen Movement's educational model or understanding. This is mainly because local values and local environment also influenced them as much as Gülen did, and they all combined these two philosophies in their institutions.

Besides, it was also observed during the field study that despite the range of the movement and the difficulties of change, the movement easily adapts itself to this new international identity. One of the main reasons behind this is the flexible structure of the GM. Unlike other religion-

based movements, the GM does not have a rock-solid structure or strict rules. On the contrary, the most salient characteristic of the movement is its ability to adapt to widely varying local conditions and its flexibility and responsiveness in the face of rapid changes over time, in other words its remarkable mastery of change itself (Woodhall, 2005, p. 10). Ebaugh and Koç (2007) highlighted the important role of the study circles in the movement and reasoned this flexibility and responsiveness of the movement because of this local identity of the circles. The second issue in this point is the profile of the followers of the movement. The majority of the Gülen followers are very well educated, highly-skilled young people. That is why they all understand and know that we are living in a fast-changing digital world and they could easily reposition themselves in this new identity.

Localization of Gülen Inspired Schools

Despite the popularity of globalization or internationalization in the last three decades, local values and local understanding are become important in the recent years. Goodhart also pointed toward this issue by dividing modern British society into two groups: “Anywhere” and “Somewhere” groups. The Anywhere group represents the people who have internalized global values and have less connection to their local environment (Goodhart, 2017, p. 23). However, the Somewhere group represents the ones who still are connected strictly with their local language, culture and standards (Goodhart, 2017, p. 24). According to him, despite the influence of globalization and internationalization, which has increased the number of Anywhere groups in societies in the last two decades, today local values and local tendencies, which are represented by Somewhere groups, have increased rapidly. He (Goodhart, 2017, p. 38) gives British people as an example, in which 42 percent lives within five miles of where they lived when they were fourteen and 60 percent live within twenty miles and mentioned that is why the majority of the British people voted for Brexit (Goodhart, 2017, p. 218). Goodhart (2017, p. 218) also suggested that such a situation is not so different in other developed or developing countries. According to him, unlike Anywhere tendencies, Trump in the US, Putin in Russian and Erdogan in Turkey won the elections with the support of the Somewhere groups in their countries (Goodhart, 2017, p. 218).

These political tendencies demonstrated the importance of localization and need more research, especially from a political science perspective, which is out of scope of this study. However, it is important to define two important terms in this point such as “Glocalization” and “Localization”. Glocalization is combination of “Globalization” and “Localization” and created by global players to challenge local difficulties. Ross and Lou (2005, p. 229) define this term as follows:

Recently, theorists have employed this insight to create the neologism “glocalization,” sometimes defined as “global localization.” Glocalization implies a search beyond the contributions and the downsides of globalization in order to conceptualize a world of greater balance between the potentially empowering trends of global communication and the concrete challenges faced by local communities.

On the other hand, „Localization“ solely focuses on the local needs and motivations without considering global perspective. To avoid any misunderstanding, these trends, glocalization or localization, are not a contra-movement against globalization and internationalization, instead it is a contribution to them.

Regional processes, therefore, obtain a new significance, that depends on a global dimension – regions need to be noticed by the global system due to the place that they can be found in,

with an example on significance of actions undertaken within the scope of the European integration process. (Barwinska-Malajowicz, 2011, p. 206)

Therefore, both in glocalization and localization, the main philosophy is “Global thinking, local acting” but the local structure or local needs have priority.

In this point, the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016 and the following political disorder play a crucial role. In a short summary, the Gülen Movement became the scapegoat in Turkey and the current Erdogan regime closed all institutions affiliated with the movement, forfeited their assets and more than hundreds of thousands of Gülen followers were arrested and a similar number of people who supported the movement lost their positions in the government or public sector. Several international institutions like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch have reported this pressure several times in the recent years. As a concrete example the figure below is from Amnesty International’s Report about Turkey in 2018.

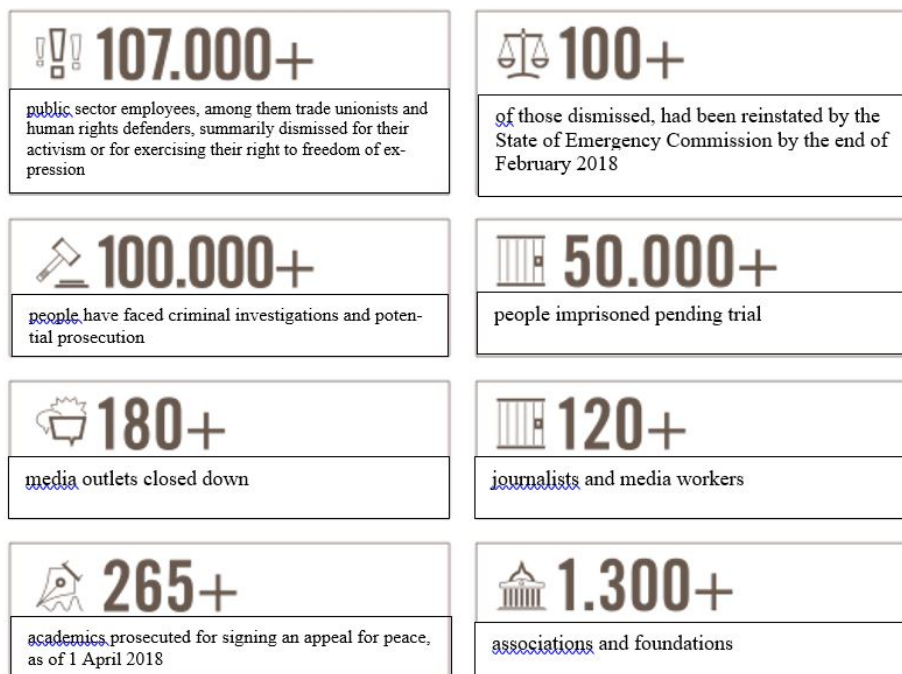


Figure 1: Human Rights Violations After the Coup Attempt in Turkey According to an Amnesty International Report in 2018 (P. 4)

This topic is also related with political sciences and is thus out of scope of this paper. However, as a consequence of the event, the movement has changed its global strategy and prefers to continue their international expansion process through localization outside of Turkey.

Therefore, in the visited three continents of Africa, America and Europe, the researcher of the study observed different types of actions. As it was mentioned above, there are some common values and practices which were observed in the field study, however many important points like teachers, curriculum and financial structure of GIS vary according to region.

As a concrete example, one subject could be whether GIS are discipline-centered or more focused on free involvement. Like many other points, this point differentiates according to the

region of the schools. During the field study, it was observed that the GIS in Africa are much more discipline based compared to schools in Europa and America. Students have to wear a uniform, there are several ceremonies before school starts and students get negative points if they do not pay attention to discipline rules in GIS in Africa. This is mainly because of the local educational tradition in Africa and GIS have adapted their identity to this tradition. However, in Europe and in America these practices are not standard, and more free involvement education was observed in these GIS. This also shows the flexible structure of the GIS which can adapt to different regions easily. On the other hand, according to Ex5, even in the GIS in Europe, there is discipline which does not limit or pressure students but focuses on the education in the schools.

I would say, there is a discipline there, yes there's a reason for discipline there, a basic chord of discipline but I would not say, I did not find it restrictive or distressing - the discipline and the truer mood, at the same time. This is my picture. (Ex5)

In the same manner, the second topic is the target group of these schools. Especially Gülen Inspired Schools and other educational institutions like tutorial centers targeted the Turkish Minority in Europe which settled in western Europe in the last six decades (Boos-Nünning, 2011, p. 207). Similarly, Gülen Inspired Private Schools in the U.S. also targeted the Turkish Minority in the U.S. and also international students from Turkey. The needs of this minority, such as integration to the majority society or educational problems of their offsprings were focused on and there was cooperation and collaboration between the Movement and the Turkish Minority outside of Turkey. A common historical background, cultural similarities and several problems related to the educational system such as discrimination accelerated this alliance. In contrast, Gülen Inspired Schools in Africa and Gülen Inspired Charter Schools focused on the majority of the society instead of any minority in their regions. They were initially financed by Turkish entrepreneurs in Turkey but later on financed their education through tuition fees in Africa or through state-supported charter schools in the U.S. In both cases, the target group is clearly local people around the school and the Turkish background of the Movement does not play any role in the education in these two types of schools. On the other hand, as it was mentioned above, the failed coup attempt in 2016 is a crucial event in the movement's history which destroyed the alliance between the Turkish minority and the Movement. The main reason behind this break is the effects of the propaganda and pressure of the Erdogan regime.

"But it is indisputable for me, that extreme repression had come, that actually should not happen here (Germany). That is very clear. There have been significant repressions and these repressions have also resulted in parents deregistering their children (from schools or tutor centers). So, we have the first group out of conviction, and some that were blackmailed, yes, with strong repression, yes, instead of blackmailed maybe we could say, no, no they are clearly blackmailed after all. And the second is that but these repressions have not only been practiced over the parents, but also over funding."(Ex6)

As an example, Ex5 mentioned that even some small entrepreneurs who have a shop or supermarket were blackmailed and forced to stop his or her support to the movement. The majority of the Turkish minority in western Europe were influenced by it and broke their relationship with the movement. Even in some places, like Gelsenkirchen, Germany, a group of people attacked institutions of the Movement and broke the windows and hung Turkish flags there. As a consequence, the schools, tutoring centers and other Movement institutions were confronted with huge financial problems for the movement in western Europe. As a result of these events, the observed two schools in Europe lost one fourth of their students after the failed

coup attempt and three schools in Germany and one school in Switzerland closed just because of financial problems.² Similarly, one private Gülen Inspired School in the U.S., called Putnam Science Academy, was transferred to another entrepreneur because the international students from Turkey left the school after the event and the management could not deal with the financial consequences of this decrease.

"We are Turk and already 100% of our students were Turk when we first opened. 35% of them are Turk at the moment and after one or two years, this rate will be 10%." (EM3)

"Before the coup, we were more interested in the Turks, but after the coup, people were more out of contact. This was the case with the older sisters, we became more familiar with the Germans, the majority of this society. [...] I do not think there is a voluntary change. As a result of the change in some conditions and needs in this direction, especially after the coup, I think such a development took place."(Ex3)

Consequently, because of the mentioned experiences, the Movement and its schools accelerated the localization process and the Gülen Inspired Schools in Europe and also Gülen Inspired Private schools in the U.S. focused more on local people, like all other Gülen Inspired Schools.

In addition to the mentioned examples, educational structure and target group, it is easy to find more examples to the localization strategy of Gülen Inspired Schools. In general, it is easy to say that local needs shape the activities of the Gülen Inspired Schools in their environment. For example, Gülen Inspired Schools in Africa focus more on segregation and poverty in comparison to other Gülen Inspired Schools in Europe and in the U.S. Giving poor students scholarships (almost 14% of the all students receive scholarships), organizing charity activities and cooperating with poor local schools around them and supporting them technically and financially are several examples conducted by the Gülen Inspired Schools in Africa. Besides, they advertise their successful students very often to give hope to the society against segregation. On the other hand, Gülen Inspired Schools in Europe focus more on social projects, arts and sport activities. Several projects are mentioned as follows:

"For example, there is a project about citizenship, we do this together with the public authorities, and that's how a citizen in this city should be." (EM2)

"The project of "No violence" is one of them, the project of solving the conflicts without resorting to violence, the other is the "pass of the media", the sensitivity of social media project, all the students have to participate in these projects, privacy, personal data, insults and not to harass are the subject of that project." (EM3)

Like the other managers in Europe, EM1 gave the art contest, which was organized by their city as an example to this point, where 170 schools joined.

² According to Internet research, the mentioned three Gülen Inspired Schools and also another closed Gülen Inspired School outside of Germany are listed below:

- Urselbach Gymnasium, Oberursel, Hessen Germany
- Carl-Friedrich-Gauss Schulen, Ludwigsburg, Baden-Württemberg, Germany
- Private Wirtschaftsschule Main-Bildung, Würzburg, Bayern, Germany
- Sera Schule, Zurich, Switzerland

"The aim of this project is to give children the ability to think creatively and imagine ... For example, we work together with other schools in "culture and arts week" and we are working together with them" (EM1)

These kinds of projects are crucial especially for the parents of these students, because most of these students come from low-income families and they do not have the resources to do it by themselves. EM1 and EM2 highlighted the same issue during the interviews and they mentioned that the majority of their parents belong to low-income families. According to EM2, they cooperate with other schools or private clubs and build partnerships. In this way, their parents could send their kids to this kind of places even though they do not have enough financial resources. In addition to that, EM1 also underlined the same issue and mentioned that almost one third of their parents are unemployed and get support from the state. This affects their children's education and they have to find ways to solve this problem. Otherwise, these students could not get a good degree or even if they have skills in such fields, they do not have a chance to flourish with them and they will become a problem in their community in the future.

Mainly because of the huge diversity in the U.S. it is difficult to talk about the localization strategy of the Gülen Inspired Schools in the U.S. which varies in different states. Besides, unlike other regions, the movement has two types of schools, charter schools and private schools and they have different localization strategies. However, local needs also play a crucial role in the localization strategy of these schools and one of the major needs in the American educational system is the gap in STEM education according to USAM1. Therefore, one of the significant common strategies observed in both of these Gülen Inspired Charter and Private Schools is targeting this gap in their localization process and they both present STEM based education with high-tech Labs. Similarly, both USAM2 and USAM3 mentioned that they organize science fairs by cooperating with universities and other institutions to contribute to this issue in their educational activities.

There is a regional science fair on Saturday, so this region means that there is a main school in this county and there are all other private schools, there is an interstate competition. One of the sponsors of this contest is our school, the organizer, the other is George Mason University. [...] Sometimes we go to research and use the laboratories of the universities. Or to bring the experts in the field to our school, they are part of our education. It is important for our students to come together with these kind of people in order to do things, to have the horizon." (USAM3)

In addition to STEM education, there are also other local needs mentioned during the interviews like poverty, segregation, lack of financial sources...etc, but these differences vary depending on the local environment. In each school in different states, several strategies are practiced to solve these problems but it varies depending on the local environment.

Conclusion

As a summary, instead of carrying a common worldwide education model, the Gülen Movement has different education models depending on the region today. In this point, the philosophy and original values of the movement in these schools, especially regarding the educational aspect, empowering youth through the promotion of education for economic prosperity, altruism, love and peace and promoting tolerance, unity, stability and the establishment of civil society based upon democratic principles of governance are the common goals of these schools in different regions (Aydın, 2013, p. 17) and there will not be any change in these goals. On the other hand, depending on the needs of the local environment, activities

in different fields, especially in arts, research and science fields are expected as a consequence of localization strategy in the future.

Nonetheless, one of the remarkable points in this issue, is as a global player (Geier and Frank, 2018b, p.56), the enrichment of this localization strategy or understanding by adding "**global thinking**" in these schools. The management of the GIS follow the international contests seriously and try to prepare their best students for these programs. Besides, the network between different GIS in different regions helps them to inspire or to contribute to each other. During the field study, it was observed that the managers of the schools in Europe know each other, share their experiences and knowledge with each other or a school manager in Africa could find the same position in America after receiving a green card, which enables him to move and work in the US. Such similar connections and cooperation are also expected from other GIS in different locations. One of the main advantages of the Gülen Movement in this point is the use of modern technology. Today, Gülen and his followers have highly-developed technology and very fast communication options, which was not possible before. Therefore, Gülen and also his followers, especially in the GIS, could easily spread or share their ideas or experiences through media and social media. Interaction between Gülen and his followers or followers between each other is very high today. Therefore, it is clear that the followers of the movement have a global vision, in comparison to other local schools. Such a cooperation on an international level, using modern technology and communication options help or give the movement and also its students' global thinking ability, in addition to local acting, which differentiate them from other schools in their region.

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