

David's Teacher Leadership Blog

23rd June 2010



When I visited Istanbul recently, my doctoral student, collaborator and friend, Ozgur Bolat swore that, when he is Prime Minister, he will make the noise pollution problem a top priority, second only to the campaign to develop teacher leadership throughout Turkey. The istanbolic noise problem stems largely from the hideous traffic situation. Outside my hotel for example there was a 10 lane highway, even though it is an urban enclave where office workers stagger around on their high heels clutching their lattes from Starbucks on their way to work. The noise of the traffic varies depending on the time of day; sometimes - like in the middle of the night for example - the traffic roars as the flood of cars hurtles by, but more often than not the traffic barely moves which seems to entail gratuitous hooting. Why do they hoot? It seems entirely without purpose. I was in a taxi stuck in a traffic jam. There was one car in front and we were sitting at the traffic lights which were on red. The taxi driver hooted – did he expect the driver in front to jump the lights?

Whether the traffic is roaring or hooting – the decibels are off the scale. Is the hooting a vain expression of human agency in the face of utter helplessness? Do the drivers feel that they are making a difference just by using their horns to express frustration? Maybe it is a form of encouragement like the South African football fans with their Vuvuzelas, urging the players on with their ear splitting fanfares. Maybe they see their car horns as having the magical properties of Joshua's ram horns and can bring down the walls of Jericho.



Even though I am a guest in Istanbul, and naturally inclined towards cultural relativism, I cant help commenting to Ozgur that there should be a law against this ridiculous hooting. Surprisingly he tells me that it is indeed against the law; in theory you can be fined for gratuitous hooting. We reflected on the nature of change management and the limitations of strategies that rest on regulation. The good citizens of Istanbul seem unconcerned with the law about hooting. How will Prime Minister Bolat win their hearts and change their minds? Will he publish evidence of the effects of hooting on male virility perhaps?



The noise problem became acutely embarrassing when we visited Karsal School to pay our respects on the occasion of their graduation ceremony. Senior high school students were dressed in American style gowns and mortar boards and the parents were sat in rows in the playground watching proudly as their offspring stepped up to receive a certificate and have their picture taken. The students seemed to be in charge of the sound system that amplified the accompanying celebratory music so naturally the bass was turned up. This seemed to be OK until the Director of Education for the district mounted the stage; his short speech was followed by the national anthem which has a

kind of military style about it. The drumbeat seemed to be accentuated by a sound system that was revved up for disco. Unfortunately the boom banga-bang set off one of the car alarms in the school car park. It was infectious. Other car alarms came out in sympathy and I am sure I felt Kemal Attaturk turn over in his grave. As if this unlikely blend of sounds was not weird enough, just as the 7th car alarm joined in the cacophony, the Sezan began. Scholars of Islam will know that Sezan is the call to prayer broadcast from speakers attached to Mosques. At this point a couple of stray dogs threw in a little howling to complete the ensemble. Compared to this racket the traffic noise paled into insignificance.

Earlier in the day we had taken part in the network event organised to enable the teachers participating in what they call ‘The Next Generation of Teachers’ project to share their achievements. The opening proceedings was a fairly noisy affair too. The lecture theatre was full – 600 teachers from the Maltepe district had come to hear about the development work of the 42 teachers who had participated in the project. We began with a now familiar ceremony. An enormous image of the revered Atatturk appeared on the screen and a lady in a black dress took the stage to conduct us in the singing of the national anthem to the accompaniment of a robust soundtrack. The anthem makes ‘God Save the Queen’ sound like a Radio 2 jingle both in terms of length and fervour. How would the teachers compete with this bombast? Well, having got the protocols out of the way, things became a little more conducive.

After a speech from the Governor of Maltepe, a musician was called to the stage to give us a master class in the playing of the Bağlama, the most Turkish of instruments. It was an inspiring virtuoso performance that generated feelings of pride and wonder. We were all enraptured and inspired.



While listening to a series of presentations about such things as ‘differentiation’, ‘active learning’ and ‘enabling parents to become partners in learning’, my translator and I discussed the education system. We wondered how the pedagogic innovation we were hearing about at the event fits with the culture of nationalism and hierarchy which seems to go hand in hand with the transmission model of teaching and learning. Then we reflected on what the Governor of Maltepe had said from the stage at the start of the event. He said that the system in Turkey is too highly centralised and structured with everyone behaving like sheep – all doing the same thing – “but Ozgur has brought to us this wonderful project which enables us to make the change”. The teachers of Maltepe district (and Karsal School) had shown the way and the Governor would be reporting on the success of this initiative to the chief Governor of Istanbul and to the Ministry of Education in Ankara. This bottom-up reform initiative would become a national reform strategy and the Governor would be supporting this project a hundred percent – both financially and symbolically. The noise of the applause was every bit as loud as the taxi drivers’ hooting but it was a welcome sound. If you listen carefully you might hear the cracking of the cement in the walls of Jericho.

oğretmen – pronounced ‘uretman’