



Incidence of violence in Turkish schools: A review

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Abstract. The present article deals with the incidence of violence cases in Turkish schools. A review of research based on published research reports and unpublished M.Sc. and Ph.D. dissertations is presented and basic lines of research are discussed. Special emphasis was placed upon culturally specific issues, besides the culturally determined attitudes of parents and teachers. The need for a nationwide system for the prevention of violence and corporal punishment was emphasized.

Keywords: incidence, school-violence, Turkey, culturally specific issues, corporal punishment

Violence among youth, especially in schools has been one of the most pressing concerns for many countries. As a result of an explosion of the media accounts on violent behaviors of school children resulting in injury or death, the issue of school violence seems to be one of the most pervasive features of the North American schools, besides being a fruitful research area among researchers in the United States. It has been frequently reported that school violence has been steadily increasing across the world as well. On an international basis Japan, Australia, and Canada have become the leaders in providing databases in regard to acts of school violence (O'Donoghue, 1992). Kobayashi and Takahashi (1988) reported an increase in the reported acts of school violence in Japanese schools (cited in O'Donoghue, 1995). Similar findings were reported for Canada (Challinger, 1987), the United Kingdom (Winkley, 1986; Kniveton, 1986) and Sweden (Jonsson, Falk, Hultman & Landin, 1988), all indicating that violence is on the rise in schools (cited in O'Donoghue, 1995). Fishman (1998) also reported a significant increase in school violence in Israel.

Many people in Turkey are also convinced that there has been a spurt in the incidence of violent behavior among youth in recent years. Schools, in particular, are believed to be facing a wider array of threats and violence each year. However, despite the sensational anecdotal media reports suggesting that school violence has been increasing among youth especially in metropolitan areas, neither a nationwide study of the real extent of school violence, nor a sufficient number of research studies confirming or disconfirming this belief are available at present. Thus, we have reviewed the existing research papers

published in different journals, books, master's and Ph.D. dissertations, as well as media reports to determine the basic lines of research and public interest regarding school violence in Turkey.

The present review of research has revealed that the issues of aggression, violence and anger received considerable attention by Turkish psychologists and have been discussed in several round table meetings. For example the effect of TV violence on children's subsequent aggressive behaviors has been the most frequently discussed issue both in academic symposiums, round table meetings and TV forums. Several review papers were published regarding violence in Turkish movies (Evren, 1993), along with violence against women in movies (Soykan, 1993), violence against children (Gökler, 1993) and the effect of TV violence upon subsequent aggression of children (Aydin & Aydin, 1993). Isçan and Demirergi (1993) asserted that violence and wild sexuality have been displayed in a more explicit way at contemporary Turkish cinema as compared to earlier movies and analyzed the meaning of violence and sexuality in terms of the impact of psychoanalytic theory.

While reviews have appeared frequently in Turkish journals, empirical research related to violence and aggression has been generally confined to hypotheses or theory testing that either has very little or no implications for practice. Several master's or Ph.D theses were carried out to investigate the applicability and validity of the existing theories to understand aggression in the Turkish culture. For example, Tanridağ and Ozan (1997) tested the validity of frustration-aggression hypothesis on Turkish policemen and found that frustration was the most prominent reason of aggression among members of the police. Some other researchers examined the expression of anger (Güngör, 1996), the effect of cognitive strategies on anger prevention (Bilge, 1996), and violence directed toward women (Yildirim, 1996). Similarly child abuse and neglect has been a growing concern among the members of several disciplines such as sociology, psychology and social work. Although limited, research directly related to violence in schools and areas of public interest can be grouped under the following headings: violence against teachers; teacher's violence against students; parental violence and/or abuse; violence employed by delinquent children, and TV violence.

I. Violence against teachers

Contrary to the Western literature, violence directed toward teachers does not appear to be a major area of research concern. The paucity of research in this area may stem from the lack of media reports on this issue. Occasional violence cases have been reported in the newspapers. Nevertheless,

those cases are negligible as compared to the frequent incidences in many Western countries (Pietrzak, Petersen & Speaker, 1998; Stone, 1994). It is difficult for these cases to go unreported because society at large is very sensitive about showing respect to teachers. Therefore any violent act that is directed toward teachers would attract much attention of the public. The traditional, authoritarian cultural heritage does not permit students to be disobedient toward teachers. Consequently teachers in Turkey occasionally face student violence and those are usually followed by violent acts toward students and can be regarded as a response to teacher violence. Perhaps the most important violent acts toward teachers are used by terrorist groups such as PKK (a Kurdish terrorist group). Findings of a descriptive statistical study carried out by one of the important newspapers in Turkey revealed that 141 teachers were killed and 45 of them were seriously injured in PKK attacks between 1987 and 1999 ("Teröristlerin katlettiği", 1999). Since these actions are not only directed toward teachers but almost all other professionals in the regions where PKK is active, it is not correct to consider them violence merely oriented to teachers. Other occasional violent attacks against teachers were also cited in the literature before 1980, when leftist and rightist political youth groups fought against each other as well as the teachers who were from right or left political groups (Akdeniz, 1996).

II. Teachers' violence against students

Corporal punishment employed by teachers appears to be the most prominent type of violence directed toward school children starting from the elementary school, even in kindergarten years. The authoritarian cultural heritage encourages the use of corporal punishment as a part of education. Its roots can be traced back to the Ottoman period when *falaka* (spanking children's feet with a rod) had long been the part of formal education. However, *falaka* or any other form of corporal punishment has been forbidden by law (The primary schools regulation, article 123) and the one who uses brutal force and jeopardizes individuals' health is sentenced to up to 18 months in prison (Konanç, 1991). In practice, it has always remained the most prevailing form of child rearing practice in Turkey. Today, youngsters run a great risk of being hurt in school by teachers. As previously mentioned, although attacks on teachers are illustrative of the violence problem in schools in many Western countries, the vast majority of aggressive incidents are directed toward students by teachers in Turkey.

The review of Turkish newspapers indicates the seriousness of teacher violence toward student. One can find lots of news indicating death, broken

legs, broken noses of students. Gözütok (1993) reviewed the newspapers that described the following incidents in Turkey:

- A senior high student committed suicide after being beaten by an angry school principal in Istanbul.
- High school students protested their teachers who used corporal punishment as a way of disciplining students.
- An elementary school student required emergency room treatment after being beaten on the head with a stick by a teacher in Kayseri.
- A fist of a teacher caused a high school student to go blind.

Although the issue is widely discussed and a growing body of research emphasized the effects of punishment in Western societies, few studies have been done to identify the use of corporal punishment in schools in Turkey. Tan (1991) has reviewed the publications of three Turkish periodicals and found only 13 published articles between the years of 1980–1989 related to corporal punishment. Seven of them were related to the study carried out by one of the periodicals “The Teachers’ World-Öğretmen Dünyası” concerning the perceptions of teachers about beating students. Six out of seven teachers who responded to the questionnaire stated that they were against the idea of using corporal punishment. It is interesting that they also added ‘sometimes they had no chance other than beating students’ (Apaydin, 1983). Their responses to the question of “have you ever been beaten by *your* teachers?” revealed that the majority of the teachers were beaten by their teachers in their school life. Those who were beaten by their teachers also mentioned that corporal punishment was the accepted and normal way of training students in schools (Timuroğlu, 1983). This idea seems to be shared by the majority of the Turkish people while rearing children. It does not seem to be a coincidence to have some proverbs such as “Parents who do not beat their daughters will beat their knees” (figurative expression, meaning spare the rod and, spoil the child), and “Bastinado started in paradise”. Other common proverbs usually told by parents to teachers when their children are first enrolled in a school are “his flesh belongs to you, his bones belongs to me” (figurative expression, meaning let him work really hard and if necessary punish him severely) and “where the teacher strikes, a rose blossoms” (figurative expression meaning corporal punishment is beneficial in students’ training).

Saruhan (1987) has approached the issue from students’ perspective and investigated the views of students about corporal punishment. In his study, students somehow reported that they were more tolerant to teachers’ mild spanking but they were against the use of severe corporal punishment which may lead to serious physical injury. This is a very significant finding as it shows how corporal punishment was integrated within the Turkish education system and accepted by the students too as a normal way of being

treated. In a similar vein, Gözütok (1993) assessed the students', teachers' and prospective teachers' attitudes toward corporal punishment. She found significant differences between teachers' attitudes toward corporal punishment and the number of beating cases reported by their students. The results also revealed that, 25.66% of teachers participated in this study applied corporal punishment at least once a week. Further, emotional side effects of fear from teachers, anger, shame, disgust, depression, and even the wish to kill the teacher who employed corporal punishment were reported by students. One can speculate from the result of the studies that teacher behaviors may be the significant provoker of violent acts in/or outside the school.

Although considerable evidence refuting the use of corporal punishment exists in psychological literature and, legal restrictions are set to teachers' violence, an increasing number of students is subjected to rather severe physical punishment in Turkish schools. One of the research reports found between the years of 1982–1986 among 8357 disciplinary crimes of secondary school teachers, 2.3% of them were about using corporal punishment (Seçkin, 1988).

Emotional abuse directed toward students appears to be rather common among Turkish teachers as well. It has been reported that teacher behaviors such as sarcasm, focusing on failure of students, using nicknames, throwing something to students and the like can be considered as emotional abuse (Hyman, Clark & Zelikoff, 1986). In Turkey, Kozcu and Zeytinoğlu (1987) found that teachers were responsible for 1/3 of emotionally abused students (cited in Erkman, 1991).

Tan (1991), in her article "Teacher Beating" emphasized the difficulty of eliminating corporal punishment in schools since teachers were also trained that way, when they were students. She stressed that developing effective communication skills and equipping teachers with necessary skills for effective classroom management seemed to be the only way to eliminate corporal punishment in classrooms. Schools have some responsibility for providing appropriate and effective models of intervention for their communities. In Turkey, many parents go along with school policies of corporal punishment and even the school authorities do not hesitate to abuse students both physically and psychologically. Turkish parents appear to believe that teachers and administrators are professionals and must know what is right for children. The situation seems worse at the secondary school level and it is rather common to have a school principal or an assistant principal nicknamed 'the butcher' in many Turkish secondary schools. Balci (1999) in a study on the perceptions of students regarding their teachers found that students described their teachers 'unkind and harmful', 'monster', 'butcher', 'vampire', 'beating machine', 'killer', 'bonebreaker', and 'Azrael'.

III. Parental violence and abuse

Our interest in school violence in Turkey, demands closer inspection of the relationship between the physical mistreatment of children by their teachers and parents which takes a form of culturally determined attitude toward children. Indeed, there seems to be a common agreement between teachers and parents to treat children in rather harsh ways. In an interview study with 16,000,000 children's mothers, Bilir et al. (1991), found that 40.7% of children between 4–6 years of age, 35.5% of children between 7–10 years of age, and 25.8% of children between 11–12 years of age were physically abused by their parents. Aftermath of punishment, 45.3% of children had some anger attacks and showed extreme aggression. Results also revealed that girls were subjected to corporal punishment more often than were the boys. Zeytinoğlu and Kozcu (1991), however, reported controversial results in that boys were physically abused more often than were the girls. The researchers concluded that parents while rearing their children, might be more tolerant to boys' aggressive behaviors toward others, but did not seem to approve disobedience and aggressive behaviors directed by their children toward themselves regardless of their children's sex.

A study carried out with parents living in rural areas indicated that 59% of them accepted corporal punishment as the only way to discipline a 10-year old who did not obey his/her father (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1973). Employing psychological/emotional abuse were found to be more common among parents living in urban areas (Arıkan, 1988). Data collected from 145 5th grade elementary school students, their parents, and teachers indicated that the stress originated from the preparation period to the Anatolian high schools exam (a nationwide examination held by the ministry of Turkish Education for entering secondary schools where instruction is in English) had an effect on children's experience of emotional and physical abuse. During the preparation period, 10% of children were subjected to corporal punishment by their teachers, and removal punishment by their parents (Baltaş & Baltaş, 1991).

Characteristics of the abusing parents have also been documented. For example, Selçuk (1985) found significant differences between abuser parents and experts in terms of showing democratic attitude, authority, warmth and nurturance, and using corporal punishment. Abuser parents were found to be antidemocratic, authoritarian, cold, and frequently used corporal punishment. In the same vein, Hatunoğlu (1994) found that children who grew up in authoritarian families were more aggressive than were the children reared in democratic families.

Many people believe that violence is rooted in the social and economic changes that have swept Turkey starting from the early 1980's. Overworked, unemployed and financially strapped parents vent their frustrations on their

children, by yelling at them, and physically and emotionally abusing them. Demir (1997) determined the factors which led to domestic violence and investigated abused children's feelings about violence. Results demonstrated that violence was observed in low socio-economic level and less educated families more frequently, mothers abused their children more than did the fathers in those families, and women who were exposed to violence by their husbands were found to be more abusive toward their children. Tercan (1995), however, found no significant difference between high and low SES families in terms of the frequency of physical abuse directed toward children.

Although controversial, these findings seem to indicate that children who experienced violence in their families may have guilt, helplessness, and feelings of fear and hate and, may demonstrate vandalism by modeling their parents. When children encounter violence at home and an increasing acceptance of violence in society, they, most probably, have become accustomed to violence as a normal way of settling disputes or satisfying a desire for petty possessions. As has been emphasized by cultural deviance theorists, violence may become a way of life, an accepted mode of behavior, sanctioned by folkways and conventional morality (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967). Generally in such cultures, there is an obvious theme of violence current in the cluster of values that make up the life style of individuals living in similar conditions. Violence is expressed in a number of situations, nevertheless, it is not usually viewed as illicit and therefore is not accompanied by a sense of guilt. In fact, when such situations arise nonviolence may be considered as a counter-norm and condemned by the society in question. In such cultures, children may learn through experience and modeling the adults and conclude that violence is an effective means to achieve their ends. Further, often physical punishment used on children may most likely cause them to learn the wrong lesson: that if you are bigger, force is an appropriate intervention to get what you want. The public perception of the need for "old fashioned discipline" and proverbs like "bastinado started in paradise" may be the major factor in the continual acceptance of a situation that frequently leads to the abuse of children.

IV. Violence employed by delinquent children

In Turkey, 1.8% of convicts received in prison were under the age of 18, and 1.6% of them were between 16–18 years of age. In 1997, 630 juveniles were sentenced to receive reformatory and 50 of them were students (Judicial Statistics, 1997). Although the number is not as high as it is in the United States, Judicial Statistics point out that within a decade there is an increase in reported violent crimes by adolescents against persons, including homicide and battery. Onur (1980) reviewed the Judicial Statistics and reported that

juvenile crime rate tremendously increased from 11.840 to 29.617 between 1940–1962. This number should be considered realizing that many more incidents may go unreported.

In an attempt to understand why youth increasingly have become involved with antisocial behaviors and why juvenile crime increased, a link between parental violence and juvenile delinquency has been established. A study with “street children” (Subaşı, 1996) showed that before leaving home, 36.5% of those children had experienced physical abuse in their family (cited in Demir, 1997). Moreover, 86.9% of juvenile delinquents were beaten by their parents (Yavuzer, 1982); and corporally punished children usually demonstrated aggression in peer groups and/or in schools where they felt no danger for retaliation (Yavuzer, 1990: 117).

V. TV violence and children’s aggression

Although interest in the effect of TV on children’s aggressive behaviors has been widespread in Turkey, many people believe that the school and family are not the main sources of disruption and delinquency. There has been a paucity of research in this area. Some authors believe that ever since violent images have become so common in the media, children have become desensitized to violence. An early research carried out in Turkey showed that 2.6 million children between the ages of 2–7 years were confronted with violent events in every 16.3 minutes on TV (Aziz, 1974). However, the findings of this study should be taken cautiously because in the early 1970s, TV was not available in many Turkish households. Another but methodologically sound experimental study (Çetinkaya, 1993) investigated the effect of aggressive video games on children’s aggressive behavior. The subjects of this study were randomly assigned to one of three game conditions (aggressive video game, nonaggressive video game and paper-pencil game) by pairs with one of the pairs being the player and the other being the observer. During a treatment session of 15 minutes, the player subject of each pair played, while the other subject observed the game. Following each treatment session, both the player and observer subjects were asked to deliver an electric shock to an imaginary child who supposedly performed badly on the game. Intensity of the electric shock delivered by each subject was taken as a measure of aggression. The results showed that the subjects who played aggressive video games acted significantly more aggressive than the ones who observed the same game and subjects who played and observed the other two types of game. These findings are consistent with the results of similar studies and indicated no cultural differences between Turkish and Western children in this respect.

Conclusion and implications for prevention of violence

There is a paucity of research into prevention of violence and peacemaking skills in Turkish literature. A few studies investigated the effect of group counseling on anger management (Bilge, 1996), and human relations training (Aladağ, 1998). One study offered a social skills training program for elementary school students (Akkök, 1996). However, these studies are not directly aimed at preventing either peer or teacher violence. In practice, there are some individual attempts by school counselors to prevent interpersonal conflicts of students as well as other concerns, but these are far from being sufficient.

The concept of peace education is a new one and studies introducing this concept have been carried out concerning the need and demand for peace education (Önür, 1994) and mediation training in Turkey (Pekkaya, 1994). In addition, the First European Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution was held in Antalya, Turkey, in 1992, which contributed to understanding the importance of establishing a peaceful democratic environment in schools.

It appears that corporal punishment has been widely accepted in Turkey as a useful, and often necessary, procedure for disciplining children for a long period. However, with the increasing exposure to new ways of child rearing methods via media, the existing pattern has slightly started to change, at least in urban schools. Informal interviews with teachers working in several elementary schools in Ankara have indicated that beliefs about the use of corporal punishment have been gradually changing in a more positive direction. Many school teachers today increasingly realize that corporal punishment can not be the only means of disciplining children, and they are exploring other ways of approaching children. Despite the teachers needs to change toward positive attitudes and methods, no systematic and nationwide effort for training teachers exists for improving their relationship with students. However, a teacher effectiveness training program has just started in Ankara with the support of the Turkish Ministry of Education. Although it may be a good beginning, offering teacher effectiveness training on a national scale seems definitely a necessity for the Turkish education system. Similar efforts should be made for anger management programs since controlling anger appears to be a common concern among Turkish teachers (Gözütok, 1993).

It has been argued that peer violence does not appear as serious in Turkey as it is in many Western countries. However, it is quite likely that many more incidents go unreported for several reasons such as being afraid of getting involved with the police and so on. Those blockages should be taken away and an effective reporting system should be immediately established to

detect all the cases and understand the real extent of peer violence. Only after that, student oriented programs such as group counseling, interpersonal skills training, problem solving training, moral education, value clarification, peer counseling, behavior modification, social skills training and similar ones can be implemented.

School principals are crucial in establishing violence prevention programs as their recognition of the existence of the aggression problem in the school is very important. Before initiating remedial and preventive programs to cope with violence and aggression, schools should have acknowledged and defined the problems that need attention.

Meanwhile, increasing parent-school contact seems equally important. There are many parents holding traditional values about schools. These parents seem to perceive schools as places where their children are placed to learn the academic subjects and do nothing else. Changing these traditional attitudes toward schools may sound to be a real challenge, but with an effective and close cooperation among school personnel, parents, outside community agencies, and the community at large, successful accomplishments can be made. Parent-oriented programs such as parental effectiveness training are seriously lacking in the Turkish education system and such programs should be offered at a national scale.

In conclusion, school violence, either employed by teachers, students or parents, has been a neglected area of concern and has not yet received the necessary interest it deserves in Turkey. Consequently, preventive measures in dealing with such cases have been inevitably rare. Future efforts should be made to develop peaceful schools where teachers establish good interpersonal relations with their students and constitute good models for them. In creating such a school environment, media have an important responsibility by showing more prosocial models rather than just reporting thrilling violent incidents.

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