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Exploring School Violence in the Context of Turkish Culture and Schools

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Abstract

In recent years, school violence has been extensively discussed in the media and has become a very popular topic in Turkey and many other countries around the world. In fact, it is possible to read and see news every day about school violence in newspapers and television in developing countries. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss the research advancing understanding of school violence and bullying in the Turkish school system. The chapter includes studies and reviews focused on school violence, including the prevalence and reasons of the violent actions in the context of Turkish culture. Contemporary studies are mostly focused on student violence and bullying behaviors. However, there is also teacher induced violence that has not been acknowledged due to its sensitive nature in previous studies. Therefore, this chapter also includes a discussion of violent actions instigated by teachers. Additionally, in recent years cyberbullying/violence have become very common among youngsters. Cyberbullying is also discussed as is the depiction of school violence in the media. Findings are examined in light of previous literature and data from other developing countries. Finally, effective intervention and prevention methods are also reviewed.

Bully/victim behaviors could be witnessed at all levels of schools in Turkey. Until recently, researchers in Turkey have regarded bully/victim behaviors in schools as a natural part of growing up (Güvenir, 2005). Although research studies about bully/victim behaviors in schools were initiated in other countries during the 1970s, it has not attracted attention in Turkey until the 1990s after becoming a major issue in schools. Related articles in Turkish literature appeared first in 1995, and many studies have been carried out pointing out the various aspects of bully/victim behaviors (Pişkin, 2002; Kapcı, 2004).

Primary reasons for the delay of research about bully/victim behaviors in Turkey include the following. Turkish culture has traditionally:
1. denied the existence of bullying,
2. ignored bullying,
3. made efforts to cover up bullying in schools,
4. attributed a sacred meaning to school,
5. regarded bullying as a natural part of growing up.

Efforts to cover up previous and ongoing bullying activities in Turkish society stem from the fact that there is a dominant conception that outsiders should not be informed about domestic issues. This approach could be summarized by a Turkish proverb that has a rough translation the “arm is broken but stays inside the sleeves” and meaning that only the person knows that the arm is broken and outsiders cannot see it. Such a cultural context enables bully/victim behaviors in schools to be covered up easily.

Most recently, Bulut (2008b) conducted archival research and reviewed violent events among students as it appeared in the Turkish media and press. The results revealed that all forms of bullying and maltreatment, including verbal, physical, social, emotional, and sexual, are commonly observed in Turkish educational systems, which is similar with other Western and industrialized nations.

In one of the early and leading study, Dölek (2002) reported that the degree of prevalence of being a victim in fifth, seventh, and ninth grades is 8.2%, of which 2.6% are female and 6.4% are male. The results of Pişkin’s (2006) research examining fourth-, fifth-, sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students in Ankara clearly demonstrates the extent of the bullying occurring in schools. According to study results, it was determined that 35% of the students suffered bullying on a regular basis and 6% of the students bullied others. Kepenekçi and Çınkır (2006) provide information about the different kinds of bullying and their distribution percentages in their research at the high school level. Among the students participating in the high school study, 33% reported that they were exposed to verbal bullying, 36% of them were exposed to physical bullying, 28% of them were exposed to emotional bullying and 16% of them were exposed to sexual bullying. The distribution of the typical bullying behaviors victims reported were pushing (58% in females and 64% in males) and nicknaming (44% in females and 62% in males. Özder (2005) discovered in a study titled “Violence and Harassment in Primary Schools” that among students in the age group of 13 to 16, 43% of participants were exposed to verbal harassment, 24% of them were exposed to physical harassment, and 25% of them were exposed to sexual harassment.

It could be said that the proportion for sexual bullying, 16%, among above bullying figures in schools is not accurate and does not show the actual extent of the sexual harassment in schools. Evaluation of sexual harassment in Turkish culture with regards to conception of “honor affair” leads these incidents to be kept secret. Hence, both the perpetrators and the victims of sexual harassment try to keep it secret because, if not, there is a large risk that it could lead to violence or even death. Thus, the fact that there are certainly many attempts to cover up sexual harassment incidents in schools confirms that these figures do not precisely reflect the reality. The reported low level of sexual harassment also strengthens the view that there might be discrepancies in other figures as well. This result was supported by the results of the Kartal and Bilgin (2007) study. The proportion of those victims who do not tell anything about the fact that they were bullied to one of their friends, an adult in the school, or their parents is very high. It was determined that the proportion of those victims, who do not report anything about the bullying to their friends or an adult, is 43%. The main reason victims reported that they do not tell anything about the bullying incident is their belief that telling it to others will both amplify and worsen the issue and create an unfavorable image for them.

According to the results of Totan’s (2008) investigation of peer bullying in schools, it was determined that 41% of bullying is verbal, 29% of bullying is social, 18% of bullying is
physical, and 12% of bullying is other behaviors. Totan investigated the predictive power of peer relationships about bullying behaviors in adolescents and found that the proportions of bullying behaviors are as follows: it was found out that 11% of participants were bullies, 13% of participants were victims, 8% of participants reported being both bullies and victims, and 68% of participants reported being neither bullies nor victims. The same study examined whether bullying in school shows any differences with respect to students’ genders. It was found that bullying shows similarities with respect to the gender. The study found out that the proportion of female and male bullies was 11%. It also determined the proportion of female victims to be 14% and the proportion of male victims to be 11%. It is quite normal that the proportion of female victims is higher than male victims. One could link this result to the fact that we live in a patriarchic or androcentric, male-dominant, society. However, one should not try to justify the proportion of female victims and regard it as natural. On the contrary, this points to the fact that necessary measures have to be taken in schools to protect female students.

As one investigates the gender distribution of the participants who regard certain behaviors in schools as sexual harassment, Özönder’s (2005) study, “Bullying and Harassment in Schools,” found out that 67% of the students stated males, 29% of the students stated females, and 54% of the students stated both males and females committed shameful behaviors in schools.

According to the results of the study made by Ögel, Tarı, and Eke (2006) to determine the extent of the bullying in schools in 2004 in the district of Istanbul, it was found out that the proportion of the students involved in a dispute was around 50%, the proportion of the students having a physical fight was 15%, and the proportion of the students participated in at least an incident inflicting others any injuries was 26%.

In a study about in which surroundings bullying occurred in schools, Kepenekçi and Çınkır (2006) found out that 29% of the incidents occurred in classes, 24% of the incidents occurred outside the school, 17% of the incidents occurred in the school corridors, 14% of the incidents occurred in the playgrounds, and 16% of the incidents occurred in other areas such as sport centers, school canteens or refectories. These figures confirm the fact that there is much work to be done to create safe school environments in Turkey.

Many research studies have been carried out so far about bully/victim behaviors. The analysis of the research results reveal both the types and the proportions of intensity of bully/victim behaviors. However, there is no mention of brand-bullying that is needed to be cited among bully/victim behaviors. The ignoring of brand-bullying does not necessarily mean that it does not exist. One also needs to mention about the practice of brand-bullying among students in schools. The current practice of brand-bullying can be defined as follows: The set of complex relations emerging by the brands of tools and equipments one use in the schools in order for him/her to be regarded acceptable by his/her environment, to gain him/her a certain advantageous status, to acquire him/her a psychological superiority, or to attract others’ attentions to him/her is referred to as brand-bullying. For example, wearing a famous and expensive brand of perfume, watch, or jeans can be considered “brand violence.” In fact, it is very common in school settings for students to use clothes, note pads, pencils, backpacks, and other items that have a special name or logo, which is artfully designed, engraved, and embroidered to get the attention of other students. These eye-catching brands and logos get the attention of youngsters and preoccupy their ruminations about them. This poses a post-modern dilemma for parents as well as educators to deal with effectively and necessarily.

Students’ tendencies to express themselves by the brands or the products they use and not by their own identities and personalities increase the level of brand-bullying in schools. Tendency to use branded items is very popular among students, e.g., clothing, sports equipments, school supplies, make-up, and accessories are widely used and become a conversation topic among children and adolescents. It is necessary not to ignore the cultural aspects, besides the psychological
aspects, of this trend. It is observed that those students who use branded products in schools acquire an undeserved and unjustified superiority over others and not attaching any penalty to their unfavorable behaviors helps brand-bullying to be regarded natural in schools.

It is misleading to assess or justify the students’ desires to use branded products with respect to their levels of economic income. This is a way to normalize the use of branded products in schools by those students who have good financial backings to regard the brand-bullying as innocent. Hence, the normalization of the brand-bullying creates an unfavorable psychological environment for those students who could not afford to buy those products, and these justification initiatives do not lead to concrete results in favor of students. One solution might be to have students wear standard school uniforms. However, this is not a reasonable practice to prevent brand-bullying in schools in any way. As exemplified above, brand-bullying and brand-violence cover such a wide range of items that it is difficult to minimize the brand-bullying in schools. Parents need to talk to their children and explain the cultural aspects of the use of branded products. The importance of using quality supplies, clothing, and other items should be promoted rather than trying to establish superiority of specific brands. It should be stressed in the best possible way that usage of branded products is quite normal within a certain cultural environment. Thus, one could ensure that students are less affected by brand-bullying.

Furthermore, even when such use of brands is applied to a bad habit (e.g., smoking cigarettes, drinking beer or other alcoholic beverages), young people still imitate their fellow students; they prefer to choose the expensive brand, the one with a special brand name, and the one that looks superior regardless of affordability. In some cases, youngsters spend their money only on miscellaneous items rather than on transportation or other necessities.

Teacher Induced Violence

Traditionally research has focused on more violence emerged from students or bullying behaviors among students. However, in recent years there are a few studies touched the issue of teacher induced violence. Gökütok (2008) conducted a study and investigated teacher violence in Turkish school systems, and later on she repeated the same study in Ankara schools and found out similar results. More recently, Bulut (2008a) conducted archival research looking at teachers’ violent and bullying behaviors in school settings that appeared in printed media.

Being a “bully” is culturally considered as a “macho or masculine” character, and it is widely accepted and socially sanctioned by both male and females in Turkish society. Bulut named this cultural phenomenon “soft violence.”

Mauer (1984) described corporal punishment as an old fashioned and ineffective disciplinary tool and mentioned that it was banned in many counties. Even though corporal punishment is officially banned in home and school settings in many countries, it is still widely used in many part of the worlds. Similarly, in Turkey a new form of government was established in 1923, and physical punishment “falaka” was outlawed and banned in schools. In 1930, a new law took effect that banned corporal punishment in schools. According to this law, a teacher who uses corporal punishment was to be given salary cuts for a month and appointment holds for a set amount of time. The same law was renewed again in 1948. However, even though corporal punishment was forbidden formally, it has not very successfully eradicated this problem, and corporal punishment just changed its form and still continuing today. According to the United Nations reports (Pinheiro, 2006), violent behaviors and physical punishments against children are very common and used to discipline children and youngsters. This report also mentioned that children are exposed to more serious form of punishments and violence at their home rather than schools. Pelendecioğlu and Bulut (2009) argued that this is also the context for Turkish parents. Pelendecioğlu and Bulut (2009) mentioned corporal punishment as a very common an socially accepted disciplinary
vehicles in the home life of children in same part of Turkey; in particularly, in people from lower socioeconomically classes and lower educational levels. As a reflection of this problem, the same form of aggressive and violent behaviors is commonly observed in school systems.

Some authors also speculated that minors are being subjected to physical punishments in schools, social welfare institutions, and other places, but this goes unreported due to the nature of this action and the shame and stigma attached to the victims. This phenomenon is also commonly observed in domestic abuse cases in Turkey. Especially in school settings, victims are being teased or name called by their peers but they do not want to report this to the authorities or their parents (Arcak et al., 2008; Bulut, 2008b).

Traditionally, the Turkish educational system is based on an authoritarian and discipline-oriented approach, which fits with the cultural norms in which the elderly, teachers, and parents have an undisputable and unquestionable power over children and adolescence and even on adult children. As a matter of fact, the Turkish language has many common sayings, phrases, and idioms about the unconditional respect and obedience of teachers (Gözütok, 2008, pp. 35–38). This is rooted in the history of the country that citizens are expected to obey the rulers and government authorities unconditionally. Against all of the forbidding rules, corporal punishment is still being informally used in many schools. And generally, the victims are being accused for making a mistakes and are ashamed to make a formal complains to the authorities. Therefore, this goes on and on without necessary changes being made. Thus, due to the aforementioned reasons, corporal punishment must be investigated. Only recently have officials started to realize the importance of this issue in schools.

In their seminal research, Gözütok, Er, and Karacaoğlu (2006) conducted a survey in 1992 and again in 2006 in four different schools in Ankara. Their results showed that the usage of corporal punishment by teachers is still very common and has not dropped down since the initial research. More surprisingly, the comparison of the 1992 and 2006 surveys shows that even after 14 years, teachers tend to develop more favorable attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment. Some of the teachers believed that students deserve corporal punishment and that it is for the well-being of the students.

Özpolat and Bayındır (2007) wrote about common usage of corporal punishment by teachers and other school personals in Turkish schools. Supporting their findings, Bulut (2008a) also found that children are still frequently exposed to teacher’s aggressive and violent behaviors. Bulut (2008a) reviewed visual and printed media for the last five years and identified 172 teacher induced violent events towards students. Of course, this is less than actual events as most events are unreported or underreported. The reasons for teacher induced violence included 38 incidences of student behavior of a sexual nature, i.e., harassing or making sexual jokes with each other, 24 incidences of destroying school building or property, 22 cases of talking in class or causing disruptions, 15 cases of fighting with fellow students, 10 cases of students who did not do their homework, 9 cases of students who did not listen in class, 6 cases of students being dressed inappropriately, 6 cases of students with inappropriate hair styles, 5 cases of students who damaged teachers’ goods, and 5 cases of students who smoked. It appears that adolescents have a natural interest in sexual topics and sexuality. Thus, schools need to operate sex education classes and seminars so that children and adolescents can have real information and be informed about sexual topics. In Turkish culture, sex is a taboo subject; it is not easy to talk about these matters openly and publicly. Therefore, it is imperative to offer sex education classes in schools as well as to integrate them into counseling and guidance programs. Among the violent actions, 49 cases took place in classrooms, 49 cases in the assistant principal’s room, 28 cases in the school principal’s room, 24 in hallways, and 22 in teachers’ rooms.

In most incidences male students were the target of the violent actions; mostly male teachers preferred to use corporal punishment for male students. Results show that male teachers used
corporal punishment 6.5 times more than did female teachers. It seems that teachers frequently attempt to use corporal punishment in schools. This is can be explained by the cultural attitudes toward machismo. Soft violence is somehow accepted or tolerated in daily life. It is interesting that student punishments and beatings have taken place in presidents’, vice presidents’, or teachers’ rooms. In order to correct this problem of teachers using their authoritarian power, teacher education curriculum needs to include anti-corporal punishment and anti-bullying programs. Pre-service teachers and working teachers need to develop awareness, rationale, and consequences of teacher induced violent actions in school settings. In fact, the Turkish Minister of Education called for an emergent conference, and experts discussed the issues and suggested implementation of prevention programs in 2006. Later, Bulut (2008a) also suggested the inclusion of parents in decision making process of intervention programs. Furthermore, teachers who frequently and regularly use corporal punishment need to seek professional help and take care their own well-being (Bulut, 2008a).

Hyman and Wise’s (1979) study on teachers’ mental health reported that 9% of teachers had some form of adjustment problems. However, no data and research has been found regarding the mental health of Turkish teachers. This can be a new area for researchers to investigate and explore. On the other hand, Turkish scholars Şahin and Beyazova (2001) listed factors associated with leading teachers to corporal punishment; personality disorders, crowded classrooms, and social pressures. Additionally, Yıldız (1992) believes that teachers who are not well equipped with educational techniques and methods tend to use corporal punishment more often.

Twemlow (2005) defined “bully teachers” as those who use disciplinary methods beyond the acceptable methods for punishing students, manipulating students, and insulting them by using their power unjustly.

Sometimes teachers ignore the students who have been subjected to bullying, cooperate with bullies, or do not intervene thereby indirectly supporting the bullies (Turkel, 2007). In the same way, Twemlow (2005) believed that teachers’ indifferences and encouraging attitudes towards the bully and aggressive children supports behavioral problems of students. Furthermore, students who have been targeted by teachers are also chosen as victim by their peers.

According to Gözütok and colleagues (2006), students believed that teachers who had personal problems and teachers who are not well equipped in teaching methods felt a sense of inadequacy and used more corporal punishment. In 1992, 31% of teachers used corporal punishment, whereas in 2006 the rate increased in 55%. Also surprisingly, the researchers have found out that well-educated and well-equipped teachers are also attempting to use corporal punishment quite often.

Cyberbullying is a new phenomenon since the Internet entered in our daily life as well as educational systems. Cyberbullying is basically described by Strom and Strom (2005) as “an electronic form of peer harassment” In Turkey, there are a few studies examining students bullying via computers or cell phones in different age levels. It seems that students tend to use more technology-oriented bullying behaviors as their get older.

Aricak et al. (2008) found cyberbullying a new and emerging type of bullying and draws attention to this phenomenon in Turkey. In their study, 36% of students demonstrated bullying, 24% bully-victim, and 6% become victims. Male students were always higher in all three categories. As the demand increased for communication and technologies became more accessible, more children and adolescents have computers and cellular phones. As a matter of fact, amazingly 74% of students had a personal computer, 82% of them have cell phones, and 63% had both of them. It appears that computers and cell phones are very popular in Turkey to the extent that some people have more than one. In another study, Kaplan (2006) reported that 94% of Turkish adolescents have cell phones.

Regardless of a person’s age, sex, educational level, ethnicity, and country of origin, he or she can be exposed to cyberbullying anywhere in the world (Aricak et al., 2008). Research by
Aricak and colleagues revealed that there is also a repeated cycling trend in cyberbullying; adolescents who have been bullied tend to bully others. For example, students whose pictures have been displayed on the Net or who received nasty emails as a form of bullying tend to strongly bully others in the same or similar manner. Second, as time spent by adolescents on the Internet increases, the possibility of being bullied and/or receiving a number of unwanted or harassing messages increases.

Aricak et al. (2008) found a positive correlation between those who have been cyber victims and those who have also received threatening cell calls. Results show that the students bully via varied telecommunication devices. In fact, 36% reported being a victim of cyberbullying, 24% via cell phones. In terms of gender differences, 13% of boys and 10% of girls identified themselves cyber-bully victims. Additionally, 19% of boys and 17% of girls were cyberbullies, 3% of boys and 3% of girls were found to be cyber victims. A relatively, small percentage of bullied-victim students informed their families, only 25% of them told their parents, and only 1% told their teachers. The data suggested that the victims preferred to seek help and exchange information with their peers as they are perceived to be more technology savvy and can provide more technological help for their problems (Aricak et al., 2008).

In a recent study with Turkish university students, Arıcak (2009) reported the rates as 2% of bully, 18% bully-victims, 37% victims, and 44% never engaged in neither bullying nor victim status. There was no gender difference in the victim status, but there were significantly more male students engaged in cyberbullying activities. In this study, results revealed that that hostility significantly predicted the cyberbullying actions and tendencies. On the other hand, the non-engaged group reported significantly less psychopathology. In addition to these findings, “interpersonally sensitive” students were less likely to be victims, likely due to the fact that sensitive people tend to be suspicious and avoid interactions with those they do not know very well. Similarly, Ybarra and Mitchell (2007) also believed cyberbullying is a complex behavioral and psychological problem that includes anger, aggression, and antisocial behaviors.

Table 14.1  Implications for Practice

| “Brand Violence” and “Brand Bullying” is a new phenomenon that came out in the context of developing countries, which is also considered a form of violence and directly or indirectly affects a large number of children. |
| “Soft Violence” also stems from masculine and macho culture in which male hierarchy dominated the female; this can be in the form of accepted and culturally sanctioned forms, but eventually it has detrimental effect on women's life and development. |
| It appears that school bullying, violence, and cyberbullying are a universal problem and have been observed in every part of the world. Thus, the prevention and intervention programs should be global in nature. Universal institutions also can be part of the solutions. |
| Generally, all forms of violence and bullying actions are considered culturally shameful. Thus, it is considered to be a threat to someone's honor and social fame, so it is covered up by the individuals or the institutions. |
| All forms of bullying is gradually increasing, this shows a very similar profile to other countries and cultures. |
| Brand violence is a form of indirect violence and has not been addressed or researched in the literature. This is a new concept, and it merits attention to be in-depth investigated. |
| “Soft Violence” is also a new phenomenon which is very common in developing countries and Turkey. Women are oppressed by the use of this socially acceptable form of oppression. But this is not only limited to female gender, due to the nature of soft violence it is a form of expression that females can also use as a form of violence against their partners. |
bullies and victims. They also draw attention to the use of the Internet and that it is not only a school’s, a region’s, or a country’s problem but it is an international problem that is becoming increasingly more threatening to youngsters. Cyberbullying presents problems for parents and educators as well as for Internet space providers, web page designers, legal authorities, and governments. Finally, cyberbullied children may also develop psychopathology and stress symptoms, which may be content specific; thus a new counseling, therapy, and guidance approach may be needed for effective intervention and treatment of cyber victims.

The perception of anonymity in using technology appears to make some students more comfortable and less self-aware, to act impulsively and aggressively, and bully others (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Thus, they are able to say things that they cannot or would not say face to face, lie, or pretend to be someone else.

Even though Turkish people retain strong ties to tradition and customs, the Turkish educational system is very much Western oriented and uses Western ideology and philosophy in the schools. Therefore, Turkish children demonstrate very similar violent and bullying behaviors as do their counterparts in Western countries.

More recently, media and government officials have paid more attention to violence, including bullying, in students and citizens lives; various conferences and seminars have been organized to address the issues. The Turkish Ministry of Education, for example, ordered immediate violence prevention programs be instituted for all public schools, and this issue is also required to be discussed in school guidance classes.

References


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