

Violence in Schools... Teacher Training... Action Research

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Abstract: Violence in schools that has increased both in the world and in Turkey is one of the significant problematic topics that calls for detailed analysis and should be solved. This study attempts to respond such a need. The major aims of the study are as follows: a) the analysis of the course “classroom management” in terms of the competencies of teachers needed to avoid violence in the context of classrooms, b) the analysis of the perceptions and future reactions of student teachers towards violence and its sources, c) the discussion of improvements in graduate courses to train the student teachers on the violence. The sample of the study includes twenty-three undergraduate students enrolled to Hacettepe University, Higher School of Sports and Technology. The data of the study were collected through action research with the context of the course “classroom management” and focus group activities. Action research is assumed to be an experience that provides self-evaluation, becoming competent and sufficient. It was observed that multi-dimensional discussion of actual violent events in the course led to increase in idea generating levels of the subjects. The results of focus group activities indicated that the subjects have different definitions about violence and its sources and that they share the statement that violence in schools is a result that should be avoided before it occurs. It is thought that the undergraduate courses should be reviewed based on the advances experienced.

Key words: Violence in schools • undergraduate courses and their content • action research • focus group activities • student teachers and violence

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The needs results from changes and advances witnessed in the societies lead to differentiation in educational systems. The definition of educated individual in the society has been changed as well as the social expectations from education have been altered. Therefore educated individuals are not only expected to have knowledge but also to be open to innovations, communicate effectively, adapt to changing society and solve the problems.

Given that quantitative problems in Turkish educational system have not been resolved yet; such qualities have not become the focus of Turkish educational system. In parallel to the changes in the expectations from educational systems, the problems experienced within an educational system have been changed. Violence in schools that is commonly witnessed in different societies is one of the major problems. This problem is regarded one of the reasons for educational systems to meet the contemporary needs of the societies.

In such an educational condition in which there is no mutual trust between learners and teachers, neither learners nor teachers feel themselves safe and efficient learning-teaching process cannot be achieved. It is clear that an educational environment free of violence is needed to provide individuals with problem-solving, effective communication skills and to realize a participative education process.

Recent violent events experienced in Turkish schools show us that there are no sufficient solutions for violence in Turkish educational system. At this point educational administrators, educators and families have significant responsibilities.

Of these parties, educators have much more significant role in this process. However, educators are not offered violence-oriented courses during their pre-service training. In other words, teacher training programs and courses in the educational departments should be updated and restructured. The contents of the courses should be changed in accordance with the changing conditions and the needed qualities should be provided.

The course “classroom management” that is mostly given at the third grade in all departments of educational sciences has the following course outline: “social and psychological factors that influence the student behavior, classroom environment and group interaction, development of rules and practices about classroom management and discipline, effective use of time, classroom organization, motivation, communication, a positive and proper environment for learning, potential behavior problems in classroom and the solutions for them.”

Since student teachers should have necessary qualities in terms of professional formation and professional competencies, they must have sufficient knowledge background and qualities on to deal with violence and problem-solving skills on violence and about the ways to diminish it. Student teachers should be provided with detailed descriptions of violent events that they can be come across during their future professional life and trained on the ways to produce behavioral changes in their students. On the other hand such courses should not be exclusively theoretical but include some real life experiences.

Violence in today’s societies has become a way to solve problems. In order to deal with violence the current perceptions of violence and the proper perceptions of it should be taken into consideration. Therefore, societies should be effectively trained about and become aware of violence. Similarly, such attempts can be realized in schools. However, first of all how teachers and students perceive the concept of violence should be known. On the other hand, student teachers should be taught to deal with violence. Based on these facts, the current study has the following aims: 1) the analysis of the course “classroom management” in terms of the competencies of teachers needed to avoid violence in the context of classrooms, 2) the analysis of the perceptions and future reactions of student teachers towards violence and its sources, 3) the discussion of improvements in graduate courses to train the student teachers on the violence.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Action research is employed in order to the analysis of the course “classroom management” in terms of the competencies of teachers needed to avoid violence in the context of classrooms.

Action research: Action research is one of the most commonly employed research techniques in social science

research. Since it provides the records of the effects of social change, it has begun to be used in educational research. It is mostly used in the studies of program development and it assumes that teachers are the researchers.

In action research, research group provides support to share the problems, questions and results. Participants recommend related actions one another and share the interpretations developed in the process. Action research is based on the deeper critics and practices of the participants about the problem at hand. It aims at developing a theoretical guidance for research and actions. Action research that can be either individual or institutional can be employed as an assessment tool [1].

Action research can be defined as a research technique that realizes both action (change) and research (comprehension). Action research realizes it as follows:

- Using cyclical processes that provide change between action and critical reflection.
- For the next cycles the development of methods, data and interpretations based on the previous ones.

Action research provides the researchers with the opportunities to analyze the innovations systematically and to develop and use theories [2].

The focus group activities are employed for the analysis of the subjects’ perceptions about violence and its origins together with their possible reactions towards violence during their future professional life and the improvements of courses in terms of violence.

Focus group: Focus group is a special kind of group interview that is designed to uncover the detailed views of the participants about a certain topic. The ideal size for interview group is 10-12 persons. Interview is carried out by a specialist using question-answer technique and summarizing. The data obtained are analyzed to develop a synthesis of the views expressed by the participants. Focus group research either alone or with the conclusions of quantitative analyses guide the action plans. In focus group research, the participants act naturally since the research is carried out in a natural environment. The participants may be influenced their views. The topic studied may be analyzed in flexible way and may be enriched through discussions. The other point is that the validity of the research is satisfactory since the research is carried out face-to-face manner [3].

The action research was carried by both authors. It is assumed that the action research is a process that uncontributors to the training of student teachers.

The focus group activities were realized in two groups in which undergraduate students participated. One of the groups included ten, the other one included eleven undergraduate students. Nine of the participants were females while twelve were males. The mean age of the participants is twenty-three.

The focus group activities were carried out during the academic year 2006–2007 within the context of the course EBB 390 *Classroom management* that has a total of four credits (two for practice and two for theoretical lecture).

Implementation: Beginning from the first course, potential problems related to classroom management were discussed with the participants during the first fifteen minutes of the course. It provided the student teachers a discussion on a common educational topic. The student teachers paid attention to the violent acts in schools. The majority of the participants expressed their wish to discuss such examples in detail. Based on this interest focus groups were developed to discuss violence in schools. During each discussion, the interactions were recorded following the permission of the participants. These records guided the next discussion. In the activity qualitative data were obtained. The following topics appeared to be significant in the discussions:

1. Violence as a concept
2. The reasons for violence
3. Evaluation of violence
4. Possible reactions of teachers towards violence
5. Suggestions about the undergraduate courses

These titles are used in analysis of the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Improvements in the course “classroom management” to provide needed competencies about avoiding violence to the student teachers: The action research provided an opportunity to carry out a self-evaluation of the course. The results obtained through action research can be given as follows:

Actual events discussed during the focus group activities made the course more dynamic and participative. Therefore, the participation and sensitivity of the student teachers increased. On the other hand, the student teachers are contributed to be ready for their future professional life in terms of both mentally and

psychologically. Such activities also contributed to the problem-solving skills of the participants. The advantages of the focus group activities for the participants are as follows:

- Independence and initiativeness of the participants are supported.
- The participants are encouraged to identify their own objectives.
- The participants are provided with the options in terms of teaching techniques and content.
- The student teachers are encouraged to ask questions and make research.
- The significance of discussions and sharing information in reaching the correct information is emphasized.
- The participants are offered opportunities to develop activities which require problem-solving skills and to approach them in a critical way.

Therefore, the study supports the student-centered designs and activities. It avoided the following negative behavior:

- Following courses without any preparation for the course
- Weak interest to the course
- Not being prompt
- Student behavior that distorts the course
- Rude behavior towards classmates
- Unhealthy communication among the participants

Given that each observation guided the next discussion within the study, it is consistent with the contemporary learning approaches that are based on student experiences and views.

Perceptions of the student teachers about the concept of violence, its sources and their possible future reactions towards violence

Violence as a concept: The definitions of the student teachers about violence are found to be as follows:

- All kinds of activities that are performed to terrify the people.
- Negative acts of people who try to solve the problems through psychological or physical power.
- Violence is a demonstration of power that is used by people who lack of self-confidence, or who have behavioral disorders or who do not have education.

- Acts of people who cannot communicate
- Violence refers to the loose of control and to act without considering the consequences
- Uncontrolled anger
- Acts to hurt him/herself or other people
- Using power to become more popular.
- Transformation of various fears and anxiety into the desire to destruction and anger.
- Violence can occur in the form of verbal and psychological abuse that is an intended act.
- Individual or group behavior that leads to negative consequences on the people in terms of physical and/or emotional manner and performed by power and pressure.
- Violence includes harsh behavior, the use of physical power, punishment.
- Destructive and negative acts directed towards an object or a person.
- Violence is the deviation of an individual in regard to the established social rules.

The definitions of the subjects indicate that they perceive the violence in terms of both physical acts and emotional states. In other words, they argue that violence may lead to both physical negative consequences and emotional negative consequences and therefore, people may be hurt emotionally or physically as a result of violence. Although the use of power is emphasized in these definitions of violence, there are no clear-cut definitions on the concept of violence. It may indicate that violence can occur at different dimensions and in the from of distinct manners. Moreover, while the participants were talking about the definitions of violence it was understood that they developed these definitions based on their own experiences. Therefore, they have differential perceptions about violence.

The use of power that is included in the definitions of violence refers to loose of control by some participants indicating that violence is an unconscious act. But others regard violence a conscious act. It indicates that violence seems to have a variety of reasons. For instance, conscious violence appears to aim at gaining popularity or gaining acceptance. On the other hand, such qualities as communication-related problems, lack of education, lack of mental maturity, anxiety are stated to be influential in the occurrence of both conscious and unconscious violent acts.

The discussions lead to the conclusion that violence is a result of something and therefore, its reasons should be analyzed. Thus, the reasons for violence were discussed in the next session.

The reasons for violence: During the second session in which the factors leading to violence and the reasons for violence are discussed the participants stated the followings as the basic reasons for violence:

- Younger parents
- Problems experienced in family
- Overcrowded family members
- Physical punishment of children in families
- Mental disorders of parents
- Migration
- Unequal income sharing
- Unemployment
- Economy-based problems
- Media-internet
- Cultural degeneration
- Alienation
- Personality disorders of teachers
- Lack of pedagogical training
- Managerial problems
- Overcrowded classrooms
- Ignorance of educational experiences
- Poor guidance services
- Lower levels of school achievement
- Discipline system
- Unequal educational opportunities
- Lack of teacher- parent interactions
- The feeling of dominance
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- gangs- peer acceptance
- poor social skills such as problem solving, anger management, communication
- lack of respect for diversity and tolerance

The participants stated that it is possible to come across violence in each domain of life and that each individual may come across violence at least once leading to perceive the violence as a routine fact of life. They also argued that there are numerous examples of proverbs and other cultural elements that contain violence making it a routine. Especially violence in family context is emphasized as a way to internalize violence. Therefore, individuals who grow up in such familial conditions tend to choose violence as a way to solve the problems.

Unequal economical conditions are also pointed out as one of the major reasons for violence. Unfair income sharing in the society leads to migration, distorted

urbanization and also to anger, burglary, degeneration and finally, violence.

The effects of media on violence through their products that value the violent acts are also pointed to be as a major contribution to violence and these affects are regarded as a source for the increase in violence. TV programs, computer games, internet sites containing violence lead to perceive the violence as a routine and to develop a culture of violence. The following reasons are considered to be related to the culture of violence by the participants:

- Experience of violence at every and each domain of society and therefore, perception of violence as a routine by the individuals who have internalized it.
- Social and cultural degeneration as a result of anger and migration that are in turn the results of unequal economical conditions.
- Cultural patterns that contain violence
- Problems in families, violent acts in the family and ignorance of the children by their parents.
- TV programs encouraging violence
- Accessing the violent elements easily through technological advances
- Individual tendencies towards violence (psychological disorders, tendencies, preferences)

On the other hand, a few participants stated that people may employ violence due to psychological disorders they experience and other personal qualities.

In regard to the violence in schools, the student teachers argued that violence in schools remind them the use of violence by teachers, educational administrators and students. They also maintained that the reasons for violence mentioned above may also be functional for the violence in schools.

The student teachers suggested that those children who experience violence both in home environment and in schools will internalize the violence and later, regard it as a routine of the life.

The participants again emphasized the negative effects of TV programs on the increase of violent acts in the schools. Through such programs students consider the acts of holding a gun, physical injure, murders as a routine. They also suggest that the negative economical conditions students experience may lead to anger and violence in the schools.

Next the participants the current occurrences of violence in the schools have changed in terms of characteristics and directions. The recent concept of

violence in schools does not only include the use of it by teachers towards students but also the use of violence by the students towards the other students and towards teachers and other school staff. The participants also argued that violent acts in the schools have become so significant that it may occur as injure and murders. The topic of the next session was developed as the evaluation of violence in the schools.

Evaluation of violence in the schools: The topic discussed in the third session was the evaluation of violence witnesses in the schools. The participants evaluated the violence in the schools in comparison to the events experienced in other countries.

The most commonly discussed topic was the policies of the Ministry of National Education in regard to violence. The participants argued that the Ministry of National Education does not develop any solution for the violent cases experienced in the schools; instead, it only accuses teachers because of such events. The participants maintained that teachers cannot do anything in regard to the violence and that they are negatively affected from such cases.

While discussing the reasons for violence the participants stated that individualism has increased and the senses of social responsibility have decreased. The participants held the same assumption for the violence in the schools. Teachers are known to be neutral towards the violent acts in the schools. Attitudes of families also contribute to this situation. Even though it is expressed by a few participants it is also suggested that families have higher levels of awareness about violence and they try to support their children through psychological guidance. However, such families are those that have higher levels of education.

As also mentioned by the participants in the previous sessions, violence has become a common way to solve problems both in daily life and in schools and the steps against violence and violent acts should be taken before violent acts occur.

Possible reactions of the student teachers towards violence: The topic of the next session was the possible reactions of the student teachers towards violence. The participants gained the awareness that they will come across violent acts during their future professional life. The most commonly expressed ways to avoid violence by the participants are the increasing the awareness levels of students about violence and being a good model for the students.

The participants maintained that teachers should be far from violence in order to make the students far from the violence and teachers must regard the students as individuals. They also pointed out that teachers should be role models for the students so that they should develop empathy with them and respect their views. Therefore, students will understand that they are valued and respected leading to perform similar behavior towards other people. For the student teachers the important point here is the guidance of students through increasing their awareness. Thus, the student will be aware of the consequences of their behavior while solving the problems. The participants also argued that in order to achieve this needs and expectations of the students should be identified.

Communication is also emphasized by the participants in relation to violence in the school context. Having cognitively proper communication with the students will support their expression of the problems. The participants emphasized the necessity of constructive support instead of punishment and negative attitude towards the student in order to avoid violence.

The participants also argued that if a student is subject to continuous verbal assault or physical punishment s/he will become a real lazy student and become isolated and therefore, may tend to employ violence in order to solve the problems. The activities in order to avoid such cases suggested by the participants are as follows: group activities, drama activities, the evaluation of the students' thought through case analyses, showing real victims of violence to the students, the use of guidance activities in order to be familiar with the students, directing the students to social, sports activities and providing them with the competencies on problem-solving, communication, conflict resolution.

The other agreed way to avoid violence in schools by the participants is the establishment of school-parent cooperation. They emphasized the significance of awareness of parents, especially of mothers. For this aim, parents may be provided with information about violence and it is also required that school-parents interaction should be the relationship among school- family and students.

Views of the student teachers about the undergraduate courses: In the previous session the possible reactions of student teachers towards violence were discussed. These discussions led to the review of the courses offered in the teacher training program in terms of the ability of the

courses to make the student teachers efficient for dealing with violence. Therefore, the views of the participants on the courses within the teacher training program were analyzed and uncovered in the fifth session. Most of the participants stated that courses they have taken in the teacher training program do not satisfactorily inform them about the concept of violence and violent acts. The common views of the participants about the courses provided are as follows:

- Courses offered in the teacher training program cannot provide necessary skills to deal with violence but provide only theoretical information.
- Violence has not been the discussion topic in the courses and there is no information about violence in the textbooks.
- If teachers are not provided with satisfactory information and skills about violence, violence in schools will increase.

Most of the participants argued that training they have received is not sufficient to deal with violence and that this training will only contribute to their teaching skills. Their reactions towards violence were developed not through professional information about violence but through their own experiences and views. Nearly all participants stated that they may make better decisions if they are informed about violence and prepared to deal with violent acts in the schools. Most of the participants emphasized the necessity of the courses in the teacher training programs that are specifically about violence and violent acts in the schools stating that they have not been offered such courses.

One of the student teachers who had received teacher training in a different country for a certain time stated that there is a compulsory course in the program that is exclusively about violent acts and the teacher behavior in regard to such acts and that it helped him in understanding the violence in the context of schools.

The participants also maintained that teachers with strong social qualities are functional to deal with violence in the schools. It is also suggested that regarding students as individuals and respecting their views are commonly emphasized as useful ways to avoid violence in the schools. Such attitudes will make it possible to create a classroom atmosphere that may decrease tendency towards violence.

Suggestions: The participants in the fifth session also developed certain suggestions about the courses

provided in the teacher training programs. These suggestions are given below:

- Educators should have more information about violence and related specialists may provide such contributions.
- A practical undergraduate course should be developed in which the ways to react towards violence and related acts are discussed and that aims at providing the student teachers the related skills.
- Students must be informed about the violence, its potential consequences and the possible ways to avoid violence. Parents should be informed through booklets that contain professional information on violence.
- Violence should be discussed through meetings in schools and each violence case experienced in the school should be discussed in detail.
- Textbooks on violence should be published and violence should be a course topic in which student teachers can express their views.

The participants emphasized the significance of in-service training activities for teachers. It may be an indication of the participants' concern about dealing with possible violent acts in the schools and about their need for related training. Such training should include the identification of violent acts before leading to negative consequences, the guidance for the students who have violence tendency.

The participants also suggested that students should also be offered a course about violent acts. As mentioned before, the student teachers should be adopting to ever-changing conditions and situations. A similar finding was also found in a different study. Finally the participants also argued that faculty members should also have a different profile of qualities and stated the content such a profile as follows: the use

of communication technologies, life-long learning for all, continuous improvement of qualities and skills, being open to global, regional, local and institutional cooperation, solidarity and interaction [4].

CONCLUSIONS

In the study in which the designs of both focus group and action research were employed it is observed that the student teachers developed an identity of active learners instead of being passive student identity. Since the student teachers voluntarily participated in the study, they functioned as action researchers and evaluators.

Therefore, such flexibility can be integrated into the course descriptions. If the student teachers are offered courses on violence in which such qualities as prediction of the consequences of violent acts and such skills as empathy, communication and problem-solving are encouraged, the incidences of violence in the schools seem to be reduced. On the other hand, the resources about the violence in the schools are very rare. Therefore such textbooks should be published.

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