

APPROACHES TO CLASSROOM DISCIPLINE IN TURKEY AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Despite Turkey's current economic growth, modernization and increased academic performance, 50% to 75% of children in the country are reported to be subjected to different forms of physical punishment in schools. Moreover, the vast majority of teachers in Turkey believe in the need for corporal punishment as an integral part in the development of the child. And despite the fact that corporal punishment is unlawful in Turkey, it is regularly carried out in every grade level in virtually all regions of the country. By reviewing the related literature, the present study attempts to explore what approaches teachers generally adopt in dealing with student misconduct in Turkey. Implications are included for pre-service and in-service teacher development.

Key Words: Classroom discipline, corporal punishment, teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

Alongside Turkey's recent economic growth and modernization, in recent years, academic achievement in the country has also undergone significant progress with no apparent major problems to be tackled in the near future. OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)'s 2009 results highlight the fact that Turkey has made noteworthy progress in reading, science and mathematics scores in relation to the same scores in 2003. Turkey's mean score in mathematics rose from 423 in 2003 to 445 in 2009. Likewise, the science mean score increased from 434 to 454 and the reading mean score from 441 to 464 between 2003 and 2009. Among the 65 countries assessed in 2009, Turkey ranks 43rd in science and mathematics and 41st in reading proficiency.

With regards to issues of misbehavior in schools, Turkey does not seem to have a significant problem to be dealt with either. PISA's 2009 results indicate that 74% of 15 year-old students reported calm classrooms where teachers "never or hardly ever" or "in some lessons" have to wait a long time for students to quiet down.

Notwithstanding the positive scores pertaining to academics and discipline, in Turkey, 50% to 75% of children are reported to be subjected to different forms of physical punishment in school. Moreover, the vast majority of teachers in Turkey believe in the need for corporal punishment as an integral part in the development of the child (Gozutok, Er & Karacaoglu, 2006). And despite the fact that corporal punishment is unlawful in Turkey, it is regularly carried out in every grade level in virtually all regions of the country.

Sadly, the existence of this culture of violence in schools has recently escalated to the point of at least one teacher reported to being murdered by a student. This violence in schools is the result of an increasingly competitive environment, student boredom, powerlessness and dissatisfaction, unclear boundaries, a lack of acceptable outlets to express feelings and attacks on the dignity of the individual (Curwin, Mendler & Mendler, 2008).

A deeper understanding of the roots of these violent acts in schools is necessary in order to generate a positive change in this area. Teacher education related to legal foundations of education, classroom management, and modern approaches to discipline is virtually nonexistent in Turkey. Consequently, the country would greatly profit from the integration of educational best practices with regards to the legal aspects of school discipline and classroom management to pre-service and in-service teacher education programs.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF REGULATIONS REGARDING EDUCATION IN TURKEY

The right to education in Turkey has been secured for all by article 42 of the Constitution, establishing that “no one shall be deprived of the right of learning and education”. Turkish education is organized on the basis of the Law of the Organization and Duties of the Ministry of National Education, the Basic Law of National Education, and the laws regulating the education system, as well as development plans, government programs, decision of national education councils, and regulations regarding the principles related to the types, levels, and functions of education (OECD, 2005).

The Basic Law of National Education No. 1739 establishes the aims of the Turkish National Education System: To raise all individuals as citizens who are committed to the principles and reforms of Atatürk and to the nationalism of Atatürk as expressed in the Constitution, who adopt, protect and promote the national, moral, human, spiritual and cultural values of the Turkish Nation, who love and always seek to exalt their family, country and nation, who know their duties and responsibilities towards the Republic of Turkey which is a democratic, secular and social state governed by the rule of law, founded on human rights and on the tenets laid down in the preamble to the Constitution, and who have internalized these in their behavior;

To raise them as constructive, creative and productive persons who are physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and emotionally balanced, have a sound personality and character, with the ability to think freely and scientifically and have a broad worldview, that are respectful for human rights, value personality and enterprise, and feel responsibility towards society;

To prepare them for life by developing their interests, talents and capabilities and providing them with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes and the habit of working with others and to ensure that they acquire a profession which shall make them happy and contribute to the happiness of society.

A brief summary of regulations regarding discipline in education

Laws on promotion, appreciation and punishment of primary (No. 4357) and secondary (No. 26408) teachers have been decreed in Turkey with the purpose of protecting students against physical and emotional abuse in schools. Corporal punishment has been legally banned from Turkish schools since 1923 (law 1702 and state personnel law 657). Correction guidelines to be exercised in the case of student misbehavior in Turkish schools are also in existence.¹ The disciplinary actions to be taken towards sixth, seventh and eighth grade students as the result of their involvement in specific reprehensible actions are stated in Regulation 27090 for Primary Education Institutions published in the Official Gazette on 24 December, 2008:

¹ Grades 1st through 5th lack legal guidelines, mandates or laws concerning discipline.

Verbal Warning: Late coming, continual absenteeism without an excuse, extending period of permission given by school without an excuse, displaying bad manners.

Written Censure: Arrogant or disrespectful behavior directed toward administrators, teachers, other school staff or students; ignoring school rules and disrupting the learning environment; interrupting school sponsored activities; continual lying, cheating; falsifying official records; disobeying the dress code; smoking; fighting.

Expulsion: Actions against the fundamental principles of the Constitution, sexual assault, insulting, slandering, threatening, carrying weapons within the school premises, misusing school materials, acts of discrimination, damaging the belongings of others, attacking administrators or teachers, promoting the use of alcohol or other habit-forming substances.

The Award and Discipline Regulation for Secondary Education Institutions (No. 26408), published on 19 January, 2007 in the Official Gazette, establishes the following disciplinary actions to be taken towards secondary school students engaging in the following corresponding reprehensible actions:

Written Censure: Not keeping the school and school materials clean and tidy; failing to fulfill duties required by teachers or administrators; violating the established dress code; smoking; handling the belongings of others without their consent; failing to attend school with all the required supplies; arrogant or disrespectful behavior towards administrators, teachers, or other school staff; disrupting class; cheating.

Short-Term Suspension: Sexual and verbal harassment, insulting, slandering; discriminating against others; insulting teachers, administrators or other staff; fighting; bullying.

Expulsion: Disrespect toward the Turkish flag or any other national or state symbols; denigrating national and spiritual values; insulting these values; theft; damaging of school property; disrupting classes, exams or other activities; use or possession of habit-forming substances; coercing others to engage in illicit activities.

Expulsion from Formal Education: Insulting the Turkish flag or any other national or state symbols; taking individual or collective action against the fundamental principles of the Constitution; organization or involvement in divisive actions with the purpose of discriminating against individuals on the basis of language, ethnicity, sex or political, philosophical and religious beliefs; disrupting the actions of school committees; trading of habit-forming substances; disrupting the learning environment; forming gangs; kidnapping; theft for ransom.

THE STATE OF STUDENT MISCONDUCT IN SCHOOLS

The most frequent forms of student misconduct

Student misconduct in Turkey may be classified in five categories: 1) Misconduct with regards to academic tasks, 2) inappropriate behaviors and attitudes towards teachers, 3) inappropriate behaviors and attitudes towards other students, 4) disregarding school policy, and 5) improper personal behaviors (Siyez, 2009).

The most frequently reported misconduct with regards to academic tasks in the Turkish classroom is speaking out of turn. Additionally, interrupting other students, moving in the classroom, and avoiding responsibilities ("not doing homework" and "not bringing supplies to class") are also commonly observed discipline problems related to academic tasks in Turkey. Defiance, rudeness and shouting are inappropriate behaviors and attitudes towards teachers reported in Turkey. However, these behaviors and attitudes are infrequent in Turkish schools. In relation to misbehavior towards other students, the most recurrently reported actions are verbal aggression, physical aggression, swearing and fighting. Disregarding school policy has not been observed to be a major

issue concerning students in Turkey. Nevertheless, issues of misbehavior regarding this matter are: Arriving late to class, dress code violations, and cheating. Finally, other improper personal behaviors reported by teachers in Turkey are laughing, arriving late to class, not being able to answer teacher's questions, chewing gum, and, most recently, using electronic devices during the time of instruction (Atıcı & Merry, 2001; Aydın, 2010; Boyacı, 2009; Boyraz, 2007; Danaoğlu, 2009; Erol, Ozaydın & Koç, 2010; Ozben, 2010; Ozkılinc-Nezihoğlu & Sabancı, 2010; Siyez, 2009; Turnuklu & Galton, 2001).

Issues of misbehavior in Turkish classrooms vary according to the age and socioeconomic status of students. Behaviors such as defiance, rudeness, swearing and fighting are mostly attributed to older students (8-12 graders), whereas talking and interrupting teachers and students are behaviors typically associated with younger (primary) students. Moreover, student misbehavior is more frequently observed in public (as opposed to more affluent, private) schools located in regions of the country reported to be of lower socioeconomic status (Akkok, Askar & Sucuoğlu, 1995; Kilimci 2009; Sirkeci, 2010).

The most frequently applied methods to misconduct problems in schools

The most commonly identified approaches to misconduct issues in Turkey can be classified in three categories: 1) Physical, 2) verbal, and 3) time away from instruction.

With regards to physical approaches to discipline issues, Turkish culture favors the notion that adults possess the right to punish a misbehaving child and that teachers hold the right to beat the child if he 'deserves' it (Turkum, 2010). Thus, corporal punishment is prevalent within both family and school ambits. In Turkey, 50% to 75% of children are subjected to different forms and degrees of corporal punishment in schools. Additionally, most teachers believe in the necessity of physical punishment for the development of the child (Gozutok, Er & Karacaoglu, 2006). Furthermore, pupils subjected to physical punishment in schools, especially in impoverished areas of the country, consider it "natural" to be subjected to this treatment (Gomleksiz et.al.; 2008; Kilimci, 2009). The most frequently observed discipline methods involving corporal punishment in classrooms in Turkey are: Slapping, ear pinching, hair pulling, hitting with a ruler, have students stand in one foot for long periods of time, kicking, and punching in the head (Aydın, 2010; Boyacı, 2009; Gomleksiz et.al., 2008).

Verbal approaches of discipline are also prevalent in Turkish classrooms. Among the most common forms of this approach to discipline are: Scolding harshly and referring to students as "retarded", "dog", "stupid", and "imbecile". Also reported, though less frequently as verbal approaches to discipline, are: Talking to the student, verbal warning, and offering advice regarding ways to overcome the particular misbehavior (Aydın, 2010; Boyacı, 2009; Çalışkan Maya, 2004; Erol, Ozaydın & Koç, 2010; Gomleksiz, et.al., 2008; Siyez, 2009).

Time away from instruction is also a common approach to discipline in Turkish schools. The most regularly observed forms of this discipline approach are: Sending students away from the classroom, referring students to the school administration, and restricting students to looking at waste paper bins and blackboards during the time of instruction (Boyacı, 2009, Çalışkan Maya, 2004).

The application of due process to disciplinary methods

The Ministry of National Education issued circulars in 1995, 2003, 2005 and 2006 with the purpose of preventing violence in schools. In accordance with the 2006 circular, a commission should be established in every school with the purpose of developing action plans for the prevention of violence (Turkum, 2010). However, in reality, physical and verbal abuses are prevalent in Turkish schools. In practice, corporal punishment is tolerated, unpunished, and mostly overlooked not only by school teachers and administrators, but also by society as a whole.

The roots of the corporal punishment pervasive in modern Turkish schools can be traced back to the Ottoman period when *falaka* (foot whipping) was a customary practice within the formal education system (Hatipoglu Sumer & Aydın, 1999). Furthermore, some Turkish proverbs such as “beating is from heaven”, “roses grow wherever a teacher hits” or “one who does not slap his daughter will slap his knees” indicate that corporal punishment is a fundamental component of the authoritarian, long-established culture reflected in today’s education system. Traditionally, when children are taken to school for the first time, parents say: “The flesh belongs to you, the bones to me”, thus giving the teacher absolute authority over the physical integrity of the child. Due process, understood as the legal requirement that the state must respect all of the legal rights that are owed to a person, is virtually nonexistent in Turkish schools.

FINDINGS

Most issues of misbehavior in Turkish classrooms are mild in nature. Insulting, defiance and disrespect are infrequently observed in Turkish schools. The strong approach to discipline in the classroom and the fact that students in Turkey are expected to exert absolute obedience to their teachers (Turkum, 2010) are possible contributors to the prevention of major discipline problems in the country.

Talking is among the most frequently encountered misbehavior problems in Turkish classrooms. However, it is important to point out the fact that Turkish teachers are predisposed to be extremely sensitive to talking and even whispering among students. Teacher-centered instruction is the prevailing approach to education in Turkey, where the role of the teacher is to dispense facts and the role of the student is to listen and memorize them. Classroom noise, even when resulting from work or study, is, generally speaking, not tolerated in Turkish schools (Akkok, Askar & Sucuoglu, 1995; Atıcı & Merry, 2001). Therefore, it is possible to suggest that the particularly minor misbehavior problems common in Turkey are the reflection of a lack of stimulating, thought-provoking, learning environments in schools. Consequently, these problems could possibly be minimized through the introduction of practical, legally sound, approaches to teaching and discipline.

DISCUSSION

Modern approaches to education address issues of diversity in ways that recognize every individual’s right to be educated, despite their particular learning style. Yet, most teaching education programs in Turkey address neither practical concerns related to individual learning styles and classroom management, nor practical approaches to issues of misbehavior. It is imperative for educational institutions at all levels to address this matter by providing pre-service and in-service teacher education programs addressing best practices with regards to discipline and instruction. Also, clear, practical instruction related to the legal foundations of Turkish education is an essential subject to be addressed in teacher education programs in the country.

Generations of educators in Turkey have approached discipline in abusive and violent manners. Most of these educators are unaware of the potential negative legal implications emerging from inappropriate discipline management in schools. The current modernization experienced by Turkey must be complemented by the modernization of its educational system and institutions, particularly with regards to reasonable, legal, approaches to discipline in schools.

CONCLUSION

Despite the significant progress made by the Turkish economy and society in recent years, remains of the traditional, authoritarian culture prevalent in the Ottoman period are visible in today’s education system. An example of the existence of these remains is that, currently, 50% to 75% of school age children in Turkey experience corporal punishment as a regular measure of discipline. And while laws and regulations providing for the protection of the emotional and physical integrity of students in schools are in existence in Turkey, the

application of corporal punishment in schools is prevalent, thus exposing the fact that these laws and mandates are, essentially, unheeded.

Teacher training programs in Turkey integrated classroom management as an academic discipline in 1998. However, courses in classroom management are mainly theoretical in nature, and inconsequential with regards to practical issues of misbehavior in schools. Furthermore, instruction on legal foundations of education is virtually nonexistent in teacher education programs in the country. Most teachers in Turkey ignore students' rights with regards to discipline measures in the classroom. This has the potential for causing serious legal disputes between educators and families concerning the maltreatment of students in schools.

The Turkish education system would greatly benefit from the development and implementation of pre-service and in-service teacher education programs in classroom management and legal foundations of education. A knowledgeable teaching force in these subjects would contribute to the modernization of the Turkish classroom which would, in turn, further the social and economic growth and development currently experienced by the country.

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