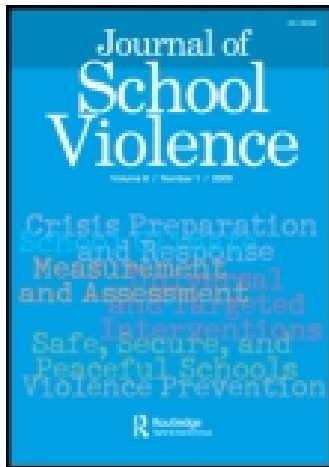


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### Teachers' Perceptions about School Violence in One Turkish City

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## **Teachers' Perceptions about School Violence in One Turkish City**

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*The aim of this study is to determine the types and frequencies of violence encountered by teachers in primary and high schools in Niğde province in Turkey, and, in addition, to determine the perceptions of teachers regarding the reasons for and methods of prevention of violent actions at schools. One hundred forty-two teachers were chosen for this research out of 3,397 teachers in Niğde by rational sampling. Data was gathered through public surveys. The frequency distribution used for analysis of data was determined separately as a percentage in a chart. Teachers defined violence as “whole verbal or physical harming behavior.” They considered family reasons to be the main reason for violence at schools and suggest that more effective student advising services and disciplinary regulations be performed as prevention.*

*KEYWORDS* violence, school violence, teachers' perception, primary school, high school

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## INTRODUCTION

Aggressiveness is defined as actions or behaviors of all types meant to hurt others (Freedman, Sears, & Carlsmith, 1989). There are two types of aggressiveness: one oriented towards persons and the other towards objects (Goldstein, 1994). Aggressiveness towards persons is defined as, "using physical force aiming to hurt or to harass," by Korkut (2004, p. 323).

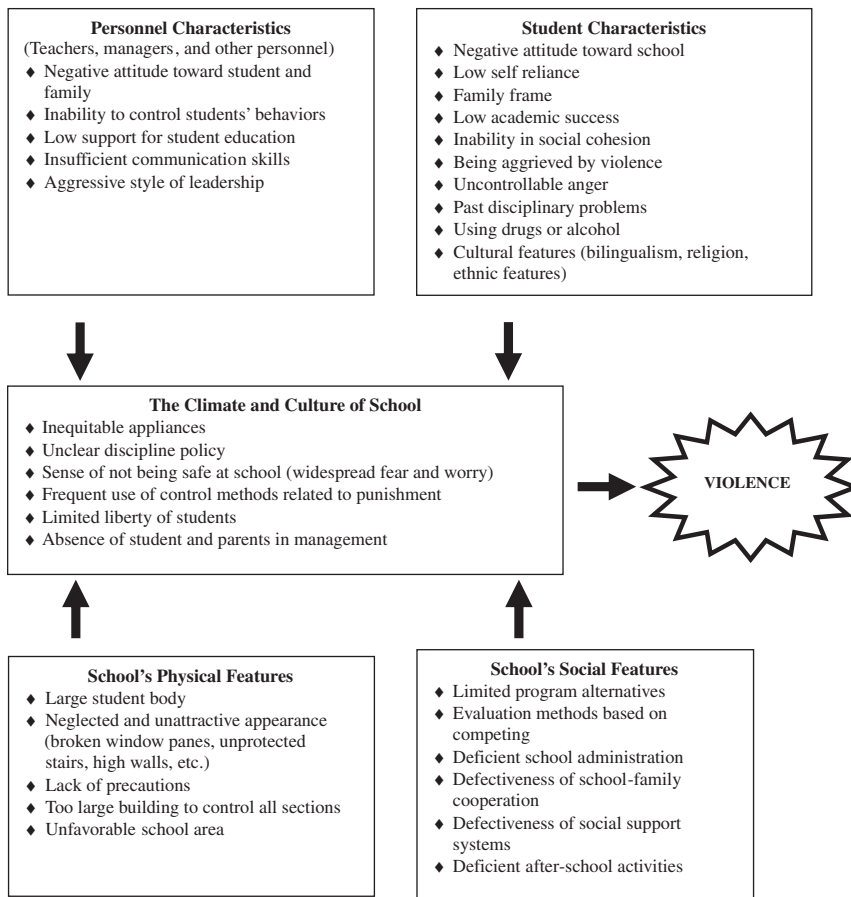
Violence at schools is an unacceptable social behavior derived from aggression that hurts or threatens other individuals (Hoang, 2001) and may appear in schools in the following forms: a physical or oral attack on school staff or another student, threatening another with a gun, using drugs or alcohol, raping or attempting to rape, or injuring or killing a teacher or another student with a gun or knife (DiCanio, 1993; Goldstein, 1994; Miller, 1994).

Risk factors are personal and environmental characteristics increase the possibility of violent behavior for a student. Environmental characteristics with a high risk factor are bereavement, a low socioeconomic level, unemployment, conflicts within the family, lack of family check on the student, and poor role models to the student (Miller, 1994). Personal characteristics are social and emotional difficulties, low self respect, being sidelined by the peer group, and academic failure (Coie et al., 1993). Male students are more involved in violent acts at schools (Alexander, 2002; Furlong & Morrison, 2000; Garrett, 1995; Pişkin, 2003).

The school may also have risk factors that increase the students' violent acts. A large student body, rigid rules, strict discipline, limited program alternatives, inequitable appliances, and limited student liberty increase acts of violence at schools (Miller, 1994). In other words, negativity in the climate and culture, the characteristics of school personnel and students and the physical and social environment of school (Morrison, Furlong, & Morrison, 1994) influence the formation of acts of violence. Figure 1 lists the risk factors that increase acts of violence at schools and how these factors are related.

The precautions that diminish or stop violence at schools can be divided into three groups. One involves providing school security by rearranging the school, for instance by identifying the places where students congregate (front of school, garden, canteen, corridors, etc.) (Breunlin, Cimmarusti, Bryant-Edwards, & Hetherington, 2002; Brown & Brown, 1996; Coben, Weiss, Mulvey, & Dearwater, 1994; Hoang, 2001), using metal detectors, alert systems, and magnetic student entrance cards to keep guns out of school (Brown & Brown, 1996), building high walls around the building (Morrison et al., 1994), and making large schools smaller (Klonsky, 2002). However, it should not be forgotten that these types of precautions risk limiting student liberty and making the school into a jail.

The second group consists of strategies based on school management. These kinds of strategies affect all students through discipline commissions



**FIGURE 1** Relationships between risk factors resulting in an increase of violence at schools.

and by sending the message that violence will not be tolerated. The third group is based on education: establishing supportive relationships (positive school ambience) between school personnel and students is important for preventing violence. The goal of this program is to have safe and peaceful interactions between individuals and groups in class, at school, and in the school area. These programs are wide-ranging educational programs organized either for all students (Breunlin et al., 2002) or for at-risk students, teachers, managers, school personnel, and parents (Coben et al., 1994). These programs work as protective factors forming a safe and positive school ambience (Mayer 2001; Morrison et al., 1994; Walker, 1995). In addition, alternative after-school activities aimed at improving teacher–student and student–student relations provides students with a way to express themselves and to discharge (Brown & Brown, 1996; Patten & Robertson, 2001).

In the United States, incidences of guns brought to school, attacks on students or school personnel, theft, and the use of dope or alcohol before

coming to school have increased since the 1980s (Goldstein, 1994). Political parties in Turkey occasionally pass “laws of students’ forgiveness”; in 2000 and 2005 these laws were passed under different governmental regimes. However, according to common opinion in Turkish, these forgiveness laws increase academic failure and violence acts. Increasing acts of violence in recent years are mentioned, especially in the media, including news of injuries and even deaths of students. For example, “a student got injured because of a knife fight between students aged 11” (Sabah Newspaper, 2006, March 31). “Murder at school once again: One of the high school students that argued because he passed a note to a girlfriend has lost his life being injured in the throat” (Hurriyet Newspaper, 2006, March 29). According to Sümer and Aydın (1999), other events occur that are not reported in order to avoid police records.

Analyses of acts of violence in schools in Turkey are limited. Ögülmüş (1995) studied violence and vandalism at schools by interviewing high school graduates. The events witnessed by the students and their frequencies follow: fights resulting in injuries to students out of school, 64.9%; coming to school carrying a knifelike weapon or skewer, 64.5%; teachers being hit by student/students, 58.3%; collective fights or gangs, 51.1%; and sexual harassment, 23.6%.

In a study about harassment by Pişkin (2003) between students in primary classes 4th-8th, the rate of those who faced harassment was 35%, the rate of those being harassed and behaving in an overbearing manner was 30%, and the rate of those just behaving in an overbearing manner was 6%. Kapıcı (2004) determined by a similar study that 40% of children attending primary classes 4th and 5th have faced harassment. In another study, teachers and students were asked about the frequency and types of acts of violence. Pushing someone, labelling with a nickname, making fun of someone, and using sexual words are the most common kinds of harassment (Çinkır & Karaman–Kepenkeçi, 2003).

School personnel and teachers have an important role in the occurrence and prevention of violent acts at schools. Finley (2003) examined teachers’ perceptions of school violence at one small, rural school in South-west Michigan. In this study, although teachers admitted that they could and should have a preventative role in addition to dealing with problems as they occur, they did not seem to be taking many actions in this regard. Further, while many were critical of the top-down approach in regards to safety-related changes, no one mentioned ever initiating a conversation about this with any administrator. Few seemed to have even taken specific steps within the confines of their own classrooms.

According to Shafii and Shafii (as cited in Finley, 2003, p.52), teachers cause acts of violence either directly or indirectly. For example, the victims of acts of violence are mostly teachers with incoherent, exclusive rules and punishment. Teachers have the potential to significantly affect or direct

students regarding problems, including violence. Teachers can contribute to forming a school ambience with no violence by forming a positive ambience in their own classes, directing students to success and being an ideal role model.

Research in Turkey is mostly directed towards determining the dimensions of violence. It is not known what kind of violence teachers, arguably the most important members of schools, have faced or witnessed, and their views related to the definition, reasons and prevention of violence are largely unknown. The opinions of teachers may lead the way for studies regarding the prevention of violence at schools.

The goal of this study is to determine the types and frequencies of violence at schools faced by teachers in primary and high schools in Niğde province, Turkey, and to determine why these violent acts occur and how to prevent them.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Design and Participants

This research was carried out based on a descriptive research model. We tried to determine the views of teachers in primary and high schools in Niğde province about acts of violence at school.

The population of Niğde centre is 78,088. Niğde province has an area of 7,312 km<sup>2</sup> in the southeastern part of the Central Anatolia Region in the middle of Taurus. The elevation of Niğde is 1,300 meters; the western part is a rolling plain and the rest is mountainous. Niğde borders Aksaray province in the northwest, Nevşehir province in the north, Kayseri province in the northeast, Konya province in the west and southwest, İçel province in the south and Adana province in the southeast. Niğde is 346 km by land from Ankara, the capital of Turkey.

There are 215 primary and 45 high schools in central Niğde and the villages and towns dependent on them. These schools are not in the city, are far from each other or do not have campus features. Two thousand four hundred eighty teachers work in Niğde province primary schools and 917 teachers in high schools, with a total of 3,397 teachers as potential participants in this study (Turkish Ministry of National Education [TMNE], 2005).

One hundred forty-two teachers were chosen by rational sampling for this study. Fifty-eight (40.8%) of the teachers in the sample were female and 84 (59.2%) male. Thirty-six teachers (25.4%) had five years or less than five years professional seniority, 50 (35.2%) had 6–10 years professional seniority, 18 (12.7%) had 11–15 years professional seniority, 12 (8.5%) had 16–20 years professional seniority, and 26 (18.3%) had 21 years or more professional seniority. Forty-two teachers (29.6%) taught the first degree of

primary education and 38 (26.8%) taught the second degree of primary education. 62 (43.7%) work in high school.

### Data Collection Method

A questionnaire with three parts was prepared by researchers to acquire data, consisting of: (1) Personal Info Form, (2) 16 questions about the types and frequencies of acts of violence, (3) open ended questions for opinions about ways to describe the violence, reasons for the violence at school and possible preventions. The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine what kinds of acts of violence have occurred in what frequencies in primary and high schools in Niğde province in the last five years. The opinions of four interested academics were used to shape the questionnaire.

### Analysis of the Data

To analyze the data, a frequency distribution was used and shown separately in a table. Percentage was calculated by the number of teachers to participants. The findings were interpreted according to the questions for which the distribution became dense.

## FINDINGS

The findings from the questionnaire results are discussed here; Table 1 summarizes how often the teachers witnessed acts of violence in their schools.

According to the findings in Table 1, most of the teachers who have witnessed an event resulting in student injuries witnessed it twice (14.1%;  $f = 20$ ). The rate of teachers having once met a student carrying a gun, knife or other weapon was 14.1% ( $f = 20$ ). The rate of a teacher being roughed up by a student or group of students once was 8.5% ( $f = 12$ ). A male student making a sexually improper remark to a female student once was seen at a rate of 15.5% ( $f = 22$ ). Four teachers in all witnessed an event resulting in a student death. While 1.4% ( $f = 2$ ) of these teachers witnessed this once, the other 1.4% ( $f = 2$ ) witnessed it twice. 16.9% ( $f = 24$ ) of teachers said that they had been threatened once by a student or a group of students.

Teachers stated that students predominantly used a knife (rate of 29%;  $f = 42$ ) in acts of violence. 26.8% ( $f = 38$ ) witnessed students using club-like objects. The teachers who participated in the questionnaire did not see pistols, skewers, brass knuckles, or scissors used in acts of violence of students.

**TABLE 1** Frequencies of Violence Types Witnessed by Teachers

| Questions   | 1 time  |      | 2 times |      | 3 times |     | 4 times |     | 5 times or more |     | Total Witnessed |      | None Witnessed |      |
|---|---|------|---------|------|---------|-----|---------|-----|-----------------|-----|-----------------|------|----------------|------|
|   | f   | %    | f       | %    | f       | %   | f       | %   | f               | %   | f               | %    | f              | %    |
|   | Has any event occurred that resulted in student injuries in or out of the school at which you work? How many times? | 10   | 7.0     | 20   | 14.1    | 4   | 2.8     | 4   | 2.8             | 4   | 2.8             | 42   | 29.6           | 100  |
| Have you ever met a student carrying a gun, knife, etc., at the school at which you work? How many times? | 20  | 14.1 | 16      | 11.3 | 10      | 7.0 | 4       | 2.8 | 10              | 7.0 | 60              | 42.3 | 82             | 57.7 |
| Has a teacher ever been roughed up by a student or a group of students in your school? How many times?    | 12  | 8.5  | 4       | 2.8  | 6       | 4.2 | 4       | 2.8 | 2               | 1.4 | 28              | 19.7 | 114            | 80.3 |
| Have you ever seen a male student make a sexual or improper remark to a female student? How many times?   | 22  | 15.5 | 10      | 7.0  | 10      | 7.0 | 4       | 2.8 | 12              | 8.4 | 58              | 40.8 | 84             | 59.2 |
| Has any event resulting in death of a student occurred in your school? How many times?                    | 2   | 1.4  | 2       | 1.4  | -       | -   | -       | -   | -               | -   | 4               | 2.4  | 138            | 97.6 |
| Have you ever been threatened by a student or a group of your students? How many times?                   | 24  | 16.9 | 8       | 5.6  | 2       | 1.4 | -       | -   | 2               | 1.4 | 36              | 25.4 | 106            | 74.6 |

When teachers were asked where acts of violence generally occurred, 36.7% (f = 52) said in front of the school door and 22.5% (f = 32) stated in the school garden. The rate of violence inside schools was 7.0% (f = 10): in the classroom 1.4% (f = 2), the canteen 1.4% (f = 2) and the corridor 4.2% (f = 6). Acts of violence inside the building occurred mostly in the corridor. Generally, acts of violence occurred in front of the school entrance door.

Teachers were then asked at what times violence occurred, producing the following results: most acts of violence (52.1%; f = 74) occurred while travelling back home, while recess was 14.1% (f = 20). The rate of acts of violence seen while students went to school was 1.4% (f = 2).

Teachers were asked what had been done for students involved in acts of violence by the school administration. 46.5% (f = 66) of teachers



answered this question. 16.9% (f = 24) expressed that the students involved in the violence were banished from school for a short time, 8.5% (f = 12) said that students were dismissed, 5.6% (f = 8) said that the students were arrested by the police and 15.5% (f = 22) stated that nothing was done to these students.

Teachers were asked which gender groups tended to have acts of violence. 78.9% (f = 112) of the teachers answered this question; 70.4% (f = 100) said that they had seen violence between males. Acts of violence done by females to males, females to females and males to females were seen at the rate of 2.87% (f = 4).

Teachers stated that acts of violence on female students were mostly oral disputes, with a rate of 77.5% (f = 110), with some physical disputes, with a rate of 2.8% (f = 4). Teachers said that female students were not involved in violence with weapons like clubs and knives. 22.5% (f = 32) of male students were involved in oral disputes, 62.0% (f = 88) of male students in physical disputes and 1.4% (f = 2) involved in acts of violence with weapons like clubs and knives.

Teachers were asked how they determine violence, the reasons for violence at schools and how this violence can be stopped. The answers are listed below.

As seen in Table 2, the teachers generally describe violence as, "all orally or physically detrimental actions." They consider the family the main reason for violence occurring in schools. As preventions, they suggest improved counselling services and school norms.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A questionnaire was given to 142 teachers working at primary and high schools in Niğde province, a small city in Turkey. The answers indicate that 14.1% of them twice witnessed an event resulting in student injuries. The rate of teachers who once met a student carrying a weapon was 14.1%. The event of a teacher being roughed up once by a student or a group of students had a rate of 8.5%. The event of a male student once making sexual or improper remarks to a female student happened with a rate of 15.5%. Four teachers witnessed an event resulting in a student death. It is clear that students try to solve conflicts by using physical force. These findings agree with the findings of Ögülmüş (1995), done to determine the dimensions of violence at schools by interviewing graduates in various cities. These results may provide information about school violence in Turkey.

Twenty-nine percent of the teachers saw that students predominantly used knives, while 26.8% saw students use a club-like object. When they were asked where acts of violence generally occur, 36.7% of them indicated in front of the school door, and 22.5% stated in the school garden. The rate

**TABLE 2** Teachers' Definitions of Violence, Their Thoughts on the Reasons for Violence, and Their Thoughts on Preventions to Minimize Violence

| Answers of the teachers   |   | f  |    |
|---|---|--|----|
| Definition of Violence  | All orally or physically detrimental actions  | 34   |    |
|   | One's subduing physically or psychologically another  | 11   |    |
|   | Winning recognition by using force to get what is wanted  | 5  |    |
|   | Using physical force to solve problems  | 5  |    |
|   | Psychopathology in social attitudes   | 5  |    |
|   | Turning uncontrolled anger into oral and physical acts  | 2  |    |
|   | An inability to direct natural aggressiveness to other fields   | 2  |    |
|   | All kind of attitudes disturbing the peace of the society and affecting education negatively          | 1  |    |
|   | Negative attitudes by students with no interest in school   | 1  |    |
|   | The Reasons of The Violence   | Family reasons (lack of care, violence in the family, and lack of control) | 33 |
| Media (the press and information systems and the internet)          |   | 17   |    |
| Lack of discipline at school  |   | 15   |    |
| A way to win recognition in society (Force symbol)                  |   | 9  |    |
| Defects of formal education   |   | 9  |    |
| Inability of teachers   |   | 8  |    |
| Adolescence   |   | 7  |    |
| The wrong choice of friends   |   | 6  |    |
| Friendship between females and males                                |   | 6  |    |
| Wrong model/idol  |   | 6  |    |
| Organization of the education system making it easy to pass classes |   | 5  |    |
| Bereavement   |   | 5  |    |
| Poor student advising   |   | 4  |    |
| Violence by the teacher   |   | 4  |    |
| Defectiveness of security measures                                  |   | 3  |    |
| Academic failure  |   | 3  |    |
| Defectiveness of social activities                                  |   | 3  |    |
| Defectiveness of family-school cooperation                          |   | 3  |    |
| Separations between students and differences of opinion             |   | 3  |    |
| The school zone (the place in which the school is found)            |   | 2  |    |
| Emigration (emigration to cities from rural areas)                  |   | 2  |    |
| Lack of occupational orientation                                    |   | 1  |    |
| Precautions taken too late  |   | 1  |    |
| Stress from exams that are too important in the education system    |   | 1  |    |
| Probable Preventions  |   | Advisory services must work more effectively                               | 27 |
|   |   | Discipline and rules must be operated                                      | 23 |
|   |   | Family-school cooperation must be expanded                                 | 13 |
|   | Social activities for students must be expanded   | 14   |    |
|   | The family must be educated with regard to violence   | 8  |    |
|   | Security precautions must be taken at the school entrance and exit                                    | 7  |    |
|   | Authority must be given to the teachers regarding discipline  | 5  |    |
|   | Assessment strategies must be rearranged  | 5  |    |
|   | The physical facilities of the school must be large enough to respond to the student number and needs | 4  |    |
|   | Controlled media  | 4  |    |
|   | The student must be respected as an individual  | 4  |    |
|   | The students must be guided occupationally  | 3  |    |
|   | The schools must cooperate with the other foundations on school violence                              | 2  |    |
|   | Events must be stopped before blowing up  | 1  |    |
|   | Teachers must improve themselves in the sense of occupation/profession                                | 1  |    |
|   | Teachers must be favorable models to the students   | 1  |    |
| Students must be given religion education                           | 1   |  |    |

of events inside the school building was 7.0%, mostly in corridors. Students generally avoided acts of violence inside the school.

For the time at which acts of violence occurred, 52.1% of teachers answered that they happened mostly at the end of the school day. Act of violence during recess were observed 14.1% of the time. The rate of the acts of violence while students were at school was 1.4%; acts of violence were seen mostly when lessons ended. It may be that things occurring during school hours trigger violence, which is delayed until school ends. We may say then that schools cannot exactly fulfil their educational functions. The young try to solve their conflicts outside of the school. There is even a subculture, with sayings like, "We will see you after school," "I will kill you," and, "No one can save you from me after school."

When teachers were asked what was done to students involved in acts of violence, 16.9% of teachers said that the students were banished from school for a short time, 8.5% said that students were dismissed, 5.6% said that the students were arrested by the police and 15.5% said that nothing was done to these students.

Acts of violence between students are mostly between males, with a rate of 70.4%, with a rate of the acts of violence by females to females and by males to females of 2.87%. Teachers stated that acts of violence seen against female students are mostly oral disputes, with a rate of 77.5%, with a rate of physical disputes of 2.8%, and that female students were not involved in acts of violence with weapons. They said that 22.5% of male students were involved in oral disputes, 62.0% were involved in physical disputes and 1.4% were involved in acts of violence with weapons. The literature agrees that mostly male students are involved in acts of violence (Alexander, 2002; Furlong & Morrison, 2000; Garret, 1995; Korkut, 2004; Pişkin, 2003).

In the three open-ended questions in the third part of the questionnaire, teachers defined violence as, "all orally or physically detrimental actions." They considered family reasons as the main reason for acts of violence at schools, including violence in the family, lack of care or interest and lack of control. Other reasons for acts of violence at schools include the press, information media, and the internet, and the discipline of school administrators. Eight of 142 teachers said that there were insufficient teachers in their professions and four of them said that students facing violence by teachers caused acts of violence at schools. The teachers in Niğde are not aware of that they directly or indirectly may have a part in the occurrence of violence at school.

The teachers suggested more effective advisory services and disciplinary rules as precautions. Other suggestions include expanding family-school cooperation, expanding social activities for students, educating the family about violence, and security precautions, in decreasing order. Only

four teachers said that, “the student must be respected as an individual” and one said that teachers should be favorable role models to the students. In other words, the teachers blame the family, media, and the administration and make them responsible for precautions. The teachers are probably not aware of their responsibilities or may be avoiding taking responsibility. However, teachers must have a positive manner toward the student and family and they must have effective communication skills, coherent applications, and clear rules. Furthermore, they should create a positive ambience in their classes, by supporting student education, helping students acquire conflict-solving skills, controlling anger and solving problems, directing students towards success, and by being a favorable role model with their attitudes to students. Finley (2003) reached the similar conclusions in her study about teachers’ opinions about violence. In her study, most of the teachers criticized precautions about violence at schools, but never discussed this with any administrator. Only a few teachers saw that they could take steps in their own classes.

## CONCLUSION

We see that acts of violence (although rare) occurred at schools in Niğde province, Turkey. Generally, the acts of violence are between male students. The occurrence of acts of violence in front of the school door and while going home suggests that the schools cannot perform their educational duties. In addition, teachers are not aware enough of their own roles regarding reasons for violence at schools and prevention. They generally think that violence occurs as a result of family and that advisory services and administrators should be active in preventing violence. The teachers should be informed about the precautions that they can take in their own classes regarding violence at schools. In-service training courses may be provided for teachers to make them aware of their direct or indirect roles regarding the occurrence of the violence.

### Limitations of the Study

This is a report of an exploratory study conducted in primary and high schools in a small city in Turkey. The relatively small number of participants is a limitation. However, this is the first comprehensive study of its kind in Turkey to address this serious problem. Consequently, further research with more participants is required. The study is also limited by the fact that the data were collected by means of a retrospective self-report. This inevitably relies on participants’ memories of events, which may not be accurate. Ideally, future studies should include formal reporting mechanisms for school violence.

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