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Dannelle D. Stevens
digitalpublishing@library.wisc.edu

Serap Sarigul

Hulya Deger

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Turkish Student Teachers' Early Experiences in Schools: Critical Incidents, Reflection, and a New Teacher Education Program

by Dannelle D. Stevens, Serap Sarigul, and Hulya Deger

Dannelle D. Stevens is an Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Portland State University (USA) and recently Visiting Associate Professor of Education at Bilkent University in Turkey; Serap Sarigul and Hulya Deger are graduate students at Bilkent University

In Turkey there is an old saying about how parents feel about the role of schools: "The bones are mine, but the flesh is yours." Turkish parents want schools to not only educate but to mold and shape the values of their children in ways that the educators think appropriate. Ever since Turkey became a republic in 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, education has been highly valued. In 1924, Ataturk invited John Dewey to assess and report on the situation in Turkish schools (see Boydston, 1988). In Turkish villages, anyone with an education was highly respected. Old people stood up out of respect when a student returned to the village with a high school diploma or even better, a college degree (Ersev, 2002). The saying echoes this blind trust in the ultimate authority and responsibility of schools to educate children.

The primary purpose of this article is to report how Turkish student teachers identify and reflect on the "critical incidents" of schooling that they bring as they enter a new teacher education program. "Critical incidents" are descriptions of incidents in one's past that are viewed as significant in one's learning and development (see Brookfield, 1998; Obara, 1993). The secondary purpose of this article is to analyze these incidents to inform the first author's teaching and field supervision. In this way, this study is an action research project designed to be a systematic study of her own practice of assessing the nature of students' background knowledge of teaching (Elliott, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggert, 1988). Dannelle explains as follows:

It is particularly important to analyze these incidents because I am an American teaching in a new, 2-year-old Turkish Masters-level teacher education program designed by Turks and Western consultants. Nationally, Turkey changed its entire method of educating teachers. I am preparing students to teach in Turkish schools. Thus, my classroom planning and field supervision would benefit from knowing more about students' background knowledge. Since I also do field supervision, I additionally need to understand more about the contexts in which the students will be learning to teach.

Background

Why should students identify their critical incidents of schooling, the first purpose of this project? First, as Lortie (1978) points out in his classic book on the sociology of teaching, teachers experience an apprenticeship in teaching during all the years of their schooling, described as an "apprenticeship of observation." This is not like a traditional apprenticeship where the student practices the craft of the expert, but one where the apprentice sees teachers

doing their work and makes conscious and unconscious assumptions about the nature of the work. These become deeply embedded images of schooling that shape a future teacher's range of choices. When students select their powerful, critical incidents and write about them, they are bringing their observations to light for critical examination, reflection and, perhaps, reframing.

Second, from the more psychological perspective, the constructivist learning theory and research underscores that background knowledge has an extremely powerful influence of one's present learning. Background knowledge filters our current experiences and can shape (as well as constrain) our learning in a new situation. It is not enough to say "I don't want to teach like that." All the work on strongly-held misconceptions in science (e.g., Eggen & Kauchak, 2001) tells us that it takes time and many counter examples to change students' misconceptions about scientific facts. Actually, at first, students provide explanations for these images in light of their past learning. Changing these misconceptions takes many, many contradictory experiences to unlearn past erroneous assumptions. Students must realize the pervasiveness of these images and reframe and reassess them in comparison with present experiences. The first step in changing misconceptions is to find out what the current conceptions are. We have to root out and examine the past experience to be able to accommodate the new knowledge.

Third, just the process of learning how to reflect becomes important in learning to teach. Using critical incidents can enable students to practice the art of reflection. We know that teachers benefit from reflecting on what they are doing (see Schoen, 1987). Reflection allows student teachers to importance to erase, reframe, and reevaluate their schooling (Tillema, 2000). Expert problem-solvers have a repertoire of strategies that they implement in solving problems. Analysis of critical incidents gives student teachers the opportunity to begin to practice the problem-solving process on problems that are close to them.

Fourth, it is important to surface these incidents because Turkish students will be teaching in the same system in which they were educated. Our new teacher education program does not replicate the past but challenges the old, traditional way of schooling in Turkey (see Stevens & Demirezen, 2002). Our students have few opportunities to see teachers who use alternative strategies in classrooms. Therefore, it is important for Turkish student teachers to see the contrast of the old with the new in as much detail as possible and certainly to examine some of their responses to the old in order to create a new set of responses.

Finally, in order to accomplish the second purpose of the project, Dannelle used what we learned about critical incidents to inform her own teaching. She teaches three classes to each student teacher group-Introduction to Education, Learning and Development, and Guidance. She has ample opportunity to work with students to help them examine these embedded images and to develop the habit of reflection. Knowing about students' backgrounds and experiences helps her know what filters students bring with them to the classroom. She wants to design activities that foster reflection such as keeping a journal and anticipating some of the resistances to change that student teachers might face in their field placements.

Context

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Among Turkish K-5 students, a group will typically spend years with the same teacher in the same classroom. In reference to our study, this means that if the teacher is a good teacher, there will be an accelerating positive effect on student learning. However, if the teacher is oppressive and does not help his or her students treat each other with respect, this more than likely will affect the children adversely-academically, socially and emotionally. Thus, it is very important to understand the relationship between our students and their elementary teachers.

Up until 1999, the highest grade for compulsory schooling was 5th grade. Students who only went to 5th grade had one teacher for all of their schooling. Now compulsory schooling goes to 8th grade. The Turkish Ministry of Education eliminated the middle schools and added these grades to the primary school buildings. One reason for this change was that the Imam Hatip middle schools began to crop up all over Turkey. Imam Hatip schools trained the future Imams, or clerics, for mosques in Turkey and typically indoctrinated children into Muslim fundamentalism.

There are both public and private schools in Turkey. The public schools tend to be overcrowded, with 40-50 students in a classroom, and under-funded both for teachers' salaries (e.g., $200 per month) and in terms of materials. The private schools are expensive and often have two languages of instruction: Turkish and one other language, typically English, French, or German. They are expensive but offer advantages, such as improved access to better universities. All students take a highly competitive multiple-choice national examination to enter university. During high school they study after school and on weekends at Dersanes (i.e., cram schools) to boost their scores on these examinations. This examination pressures the three-year high schools to teach to the test. It also causes teachers to feel that they are in competition with Dersane teachers who might know more about content knowledge (Stevens & Demirezen, 2002).

Turkish teacher education has undergone a transformation within the last three years (Stevens & Demirezen, 2002; Sands, 2002; Guncher, 1998). The new model is constructivist-based and requires student teachers to spend considerably more time in the schools than in the past. The program was designed with Turks and Westerners in a World Bank program whose goal was to infuse more school experiences and more Western methodologies into the teacher training classes (Guncher, 1998). It really moves the old apprenticeship model of teacher education to a new model where the university has a larger role, and student teachers spend considerably more time in schools under guidance with mentor teachers and university supervisors. In the past, student teachers typically spent two weeks in schools and taught four lessons as their entire school experience. The new national teacher education program interweaves theory and practice in a research-based program. Students spend at least one day a week in schools for every semester in our program.

Methods

As an action research project, this systematic study includes Dannelle's intention to improve her practice. In her second year in Turkey and the second year of the new Masters level national teacher program, she collected data from a class assignment on the critical incidents that new student teachers recalled from their schooling. This was the first assignment within the first two

weeks in an Introduction to Education class. The class in which the study took place is offered at a private English-language-of-instruction university in Ankara, Turkey.

The majority of the population from whom the essays were collected was female (85%). All were learning to be high school teachers in one of four areas: history, English language teaching, Turkish language and literature, and biology. All received a full-tuition scholarship from the university to attend the program. There were 26 individual essays in which each student wrote about three critical incidents (one student wrote four incidents) in their schooling for a total of 79 incidents. When Dannelle read the essays, she was struck with what the students had experienced in schools. She invited two of her graduate students to also read the essays and help with the analysis since they could provide a cultural lens, and thus a more valid interpretation of the incidents. In addition, allowing three scholars to review the data increased the reliability of their collective interpretation. Both graduate students are studying to be high school history teachers, so they helped with the historical context of this research as well.

The assignment did not specify whether or not the incidents should be positive or negative experiences. However, it stressed that the incidents should be powerful images of how they remembered their schools and teachers. The grade level or content were not predetermined. All three authors read all the incidents and each classified the incidents as positive and negative. Positive incidents were those that the student teacher described as inspirational events in their schooling, whereas negative incidents were discouraging events in which they often commented that they do not want to be a teacher like that. Each incident was read at least three times, looking for common themes among the data.

Results

During the 1-11 grades of schooling, our results indicate that many student teachers had a mixture of experience in both public and private schools. Twelve students (48%) spent all of their 1-11 grades in public schools and 1 student (12%) spent all of her time in private school. There were 96 different schools that the students attended. Of these 71.87% (69 schools) were public schools and 28.13% (27 schools) were private.

In order to look at the positive and negative perceptions of these critical incidents, we selected only those incidents that had occurred at schools from 1-11, not at the university, at home, nor at a place of work. Therefore, 19 incidents were not included in the analysis because they occurred at the university or with their parents at home. We did include the incidents from the Dersanes, the cram schools that some students attended during high school to boost their entrance exam scores. From our analysis of the incidents overall, the students selected an equal number of negative and positive incidents.

In terms of the public-private school dimension, more students attended public schools. The percentage of *positive* incidents in *public* schools versus private was 52% (26) versus 48% (23). On the other hand, in the *private* schools, the percentage ratios were 37% (4) positive to 63% (7) negative incidents. There were more negative incidents in the private schools than the public schools. However, the numbers are not as large as those in the public schools (see Table 1). For the public schools, it appears that there is approximately an equal number of positive and

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negative incidents. In the private schools, however, there seems to be more negative critical incidents. Of course, we should be careful not to generalize from this data because the number of incidents in the private schools is significantly fewer than those in the public schools.

Table 1: Type of School (Public, Private) by Critical Incidents (Positive, Negative)

	Positive Incidents	**Negative Incidents**	**Total Incidents**
# / % (Public)	26/52%	23/48%	49/100%
# / % (Private)	4/37%	7/63%	11/100%
Total Incidents	30	30	60
% of Total Incidents	50%	50%	100%

In terms of the positive-negative dimension, generally there were equal numbers of positive and negative incidents across all schools. Even though there were equal numbers of incidents across the schools, there were many more critical incidents reported from the private than the public schools 82% (49, public) vs. 18% (11, private). Public schools seem to play a powerful role in shaping students' thinking about teaching. The students attended public school for about 72% of their time in schools but by shear numbers, there are both more positive and negative incidents in these schools than in the private schools.

Among these incidents those that most vividly describe the role of the teacher and how the teacher responded to misbehavior are compelling. One occurred in a village. In the village primary school, students spanning five grades did their lessons in one classroom location, much like one-room schools in early America. One of the student teachers, Hakan, had an extraordinary and enthusiastic teacher who encouraged his students to attend the secondary (middle) school. He encouraged Hakan to continue his education "because no one before me attended that school in my village as the people were farmers and as the secondary school was far away from our village, so their sons and daughters were at the end of their schooling [at the end of 5th grade]." The student teacher described his village teacher as "a teacher who encouraged his students to speak out to express themselves freely to gain the sense of democracy."

Another positive incident occurred in a private high school. Although conditions of this school are different from those in the first incident, the effect of both incidents on the student teachers is the same. This second student teacher, Defne, was not interested in any of her lessons. All she wanted to do was play sports. Then, she tells of meeting her Turkish literature teacher who only stayed at the school for half a year. His teaching methods differed very much from her other teachers because he encouraged her to read and write without forcing her.

My teacher was very gentle. While telling my mistakes, he generally appreciated what I wrote because I was good at writing. He was reading my compositions and poems loudly in class and

said, 'Look! What a nice work she did!' I was proud of myself and I started to produce better works in each lesson.

This student teacher plans to become a Turkish language and literature teacher after the program. She is very determined to motivate her students in each step of their learning, just as her teacher did.

On the other hand, there were also negative incidents that affected student teachers' images of schooling. Hakan described his experience of teachers and schools in his village before he met the inspirational teacher he described above:

It was the year, 1987 that I was introduced to a new teacher in a small, poor village, whose only brick building was the school. Other buildings, houses, were of adobe. He was the only teacher. I had to hide myself from him when I saw him in the street at that time. Because with any wrong deed, the teacher would punish us by kicking us. Because of such punishments, we did not even dare to raise our hands to give an answer because we were afraid of his reaction. They were mostly hitting our hands with a varnished, smooth stick if we failed to give the right answer or if we came to class being unprepared. We were just primary school students but the teachers tried to make us memorize the assigned unit of the book and come to the class and start to tell word-by-word as it is written in the book.

Another student, Buket, recalled a powerful negative experience with a primary school teacher at a private school. Now she recognizes that the teacher had poor management skills but, then, the teacher's behavior made Buket feel ashamed of whom she was. Burket writes,

When we made a mistake in a lesson or if we got a bad mark, she used to humiliate us among other students. We were hardly learning in such an anxious environment. The worst thing I remember was the seating plan she had ordered which was a part of punishment when we were in the 4th grade. It was after an exam and there were many bad marks so she decided to punish us. The whole class was classified as (either) hardworking or lazy students. Lazy students were sitting in one row and hardworking students were sitting in the other. It was a great shame for me that I was in the 'lazy' row. Actually, her purpose was to make us study more and get rid of that status but such a humiliation caused a lack of self-confidence in us.

This incident led her to understand that a teacher has a great responsibility to provide a comfortable and safe classroom environment rather than one where the students fear being scolded or humiliated.

Another negative incident described by a student teacher, Bilge, occurred within her first week of school in Kindergarten:

At the third day of the school while I was looking outside the window, my teacher hit me. Because I was not listening to her She threatened me to not say this to my family. I cried the whole day and after school my mother understood that there was something wrong. Then, I explained everything with my tears. My father went to the school to talk with the director. However, the director did not do anything and did not change my class. The teacher came and

explained why she did such a thing. She had divorced her husband and he had taken all of her money. At the end I was the victim. After this event, I did not want to go to school. I hated my teacher and my classmates, because they loved the teacher.

Bilge spent three more years with this teacher until her family moved out of the community. It affected her relations with future teachers because "I lost my belief in teachers." At other grade levels she said, "I worked very hard. Because I wanted to prove my cleverness and teachers would not have anything to say." This incident inspires her now to learn how to not repeat such behavior with young people when she becomes a teacher.

When Dannelle reflected on these incidents in terms of her own university classroom, she realized two things: First, there is an equal number of positive and negative images for the students. Dannelle explains, "I am glad there are positive incidents, resources, for my students to draw on as they learn to teach." Second, the negative incidents are more problematic in learning to teach. Some of the negative incidents include corporal punishment and the use of physical violence. Others include psychological punishment: humiliation and shame. These images are challenging to work with, and it is often difficult to help students to examine and reframe. However, discussion, reflection, and case studies can help students surface their background experiences and understand the full impact on their own students' learning and conception of schooling of these methods of classroom management.

Conclusion

These critical incidents describe the deeply embedded experiences that student teachers recall. There are many wonderful, positive incidents mixed up with the negative. The negative incidents often seem to involve some form of corporal punishment and to that end have a deep, enduring effect on student teachers' notions of schooling. Indeed, some students describe incidents in which they were physically abused by teachers, leaving with them a lasting impression of fear, humiliation, and hatred.

As an action research project, this information about the powerful incidents in student teachers' schooling has helped Dannelle teach her teacher education courses. She realizes, of course, it is not enough to deliver theoretical knowledge about classroom instruction. Her students need to be actively engaged in reflecting on choices that teachers make and the consequences of those choices not only on student learning but also on student images of schooling. Students in Turkey need to be actively involved in the application of this theoretical knowledge. To this end, she plans to have her students do the following:

1. analyze case studies from familiar Turkish school contexts
2. reflect on school observations in their journals
3. participate in discussions to practice reframing their former school experiences
4. re-construct their images of what is positive in schools
5. predict how they can continue to create positive environments in their classrooms.

Despite reports of negative critical incidents, student teachers still enroll in our program; we are encouraged by their inspiration to become the best teachers that they can be, knowing that

experiences in our past give us the range of acceptable behavior. Through teacher education we hope to expand and enrich their images of teaching so that the choices in their "teaching palette" are rich, deep, and warm --not dull, acidic, and damaging to their students' flesh.

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