

**The Perception of Violence and the Experiences of Students at a Secondary School for the Visually Impaired****Sevil Albayrak<sup>1</sup>****Kamer Gur<sup>2</sup>**<sup>1</sup> PhD, Assistant Professor, Kırıkkale University, Faculty of Health Science, Kırıkkale, Turkey<sup>2</sup> PhD (Co-authors), Assistant Professor, Marmara University, Faculty of Health Science, Department of Community Health Nursing**Abstract**

Violence is prevalent all around the world and particularly seen to be directed toward children and the disabled. This qualitative study, conducted at a Secondary School for the Visually Impaired in 2011-2012, used phenomenological design and is based on the personal accounts of the student at the school. A semi-structured questionnaire drawn up by the researchers was used as a data collection instrument in the study. Data were collected from 21 students. The students with congenital impaired vision comprised 85.7% of the class. Theme 1: The students' perception of violence. Theme 2: The students' experiences with violence in terms of their definition of the term. Theme 3: Experiences with physical violence. Theme 4: Experiences with verbal abuse. Theme 5: Experiences with emotional abuse and how students behave when subjected to violence. The experiences with violence were analyzed in terms of sub-concepts and sub-texts. The conclusion was reached from an analysis of the students' statements that their experience with violence was mostly in the form of beating and being beaten rather than in other forms of physical violence; their experiences with verbal abuse was mostly in the form of being teased, being subjected to name-calling and being insulted. Recommendations are that the factors related to the violence disabled students experience are explored, that a scale specific to measuring acts of violence toward the disabled is developed to contribute to studies in this context, that public mental health nurses conduct specific research on sensitive groups in the community, and that school nurses incorporate the matter of violence in their in house programs.

**Keywords:** visual impairment, violence perception, experience with violence, school nursing, secondary school

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**Introduction**

Violent behavior is frequently observed in the school environment and this has an adverse effect on students' futures. World Health Organization (WHO) (2002a) has defined violence in four dimensions: physical, emotional, verbal and sexual (1).

It can be seen, however, that many acts of violence in society are not perceived as such, and that being exposed to rough and coarse words and behavior is customarily accepted as violence (2-4).

Violence is prevalent all around the world and is directed particularly toward

children and the disabled (5). United Nations Children Funds (UNICEF) "State of the World's Children in Numbers 2014" report points to the fact that the rights of children all over the world are being violated and that they are being deprived of their most basic needs (6). According to UNICEF's 2007 State of the World's Children Report, every year, 275 million children are subjected to violence, injured, neglected or exploited by their mother, father and/or some other relative (7). Violent abuse of children has many adverse outcomes both in the short- and long-term, and especially in the context of psychological manifestations (8, 9). Research shows that visually impaired adolescents have a lower level of self-esteem and experience many more psychosocial issues than their healthy peers (10-12). There are many factors that play a role in this and among them is being exposed to violence (13).

Studies carried out with disabled children are usually based on personal reports. It is therefore rather difficult to find reliable research on violent experiences, especially on those of children (14). At the same time, various studies have shown that disabled children are more exposed to acts of violence than their counterparts (15-17). One study has asserted that children who are boarding school pupils are under increased risk of encountering acts of violence (18). Research has demonstrated a need for more detailed studies on the way disabled individuals experience violence and the effects of abuse on disabled children (17).

Since violence has an impact on a student's physical and psychosocial health, it is an issue that must be dealt with by all health professionals. School nurses have a closer relationship with students compared to other school employees. Because school nurses are the first person's students would apply to in the event of an act of violence, important duties fall upon the shoulders of the school nurse in terms of recognizing

signs of violence at an early stage and of treating the adverse results of such actions. It is believed that nursing initiatives may be effective in preventing an outburst of violence and that nurses may be able to coordinate the care that is needed when violent events are in the process of occurring (19, 20).

The purpose of this study was to use a qualitative research approach to determine the status of middle school students at a secondary school for the visually impaired in terms of their exposure to violence and to explore their perceptions of and experiences with violence.

## **Methods**

### **Participant**

This qualitative study was conducted at a Secondary School for the Visually Impaired with 21 visually impaired middle school students over the period October 24 - November 4, 2011 using a phenomenological design. The school had an infirmary but no regular nurse. However, health services were being provided to the school 4 days a week by public health nursing researchers as part of their clinical education program, a practice that has been continued for 18 years. The students were in class between the hours 09:00-15:30.

### **Instruments**

A semi-structured questionnaire drawn up by the researchers on the basis of the literature (3, 4, 7, 21, 22) was used as the data collection instrument. The form included socio-demographic questions on the age and gender of the students, when their visual impairment had come about. The students were also asked to provide their definition of violence and evaluate the four dimensions of violence (physical, verbal, emotional and sexual) in terms of their families, friends, teachers, and school personnel, and to indicate their reactions to any violence they had experienced.

### **Procedure**

A semi-structured questionnaire and the method of in-depth interviews were used in the phenomenological design to

determine whether the students had ever encountered violence in their relationships with their families, friends, teachers and school employees. Interviews were held with middle school students (5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades). Responses were seen to be similar after interviews had been conducted with 12 students, but based on the knowledge in the literature that the disabled might be subjected to sexual violence and in the light of the fact that no responses to support this hypothesis had been received; the number of interviews was increased to 21. When it became clear that responses were all similar, the interviews were terminated.

#### **Analyses**

The interviews were taped and then transcribed the same day. The data texts were later separately read by three researchers; they were then coded and the codes were subsequently compared. A final list of codes was ultimately put together consisting of the old and new codes agreed upon by the researchers. After this procedure, the interview documents were read once again and the coding was set up according to the revised list of codes. The perceptions of violence of the students and their experiences were analyzed one by one. In the light of the observations of the researchers prior to the study and the information gleaned from the literature, an analysis was made of the students' definitions of violence, their experiences, and their relationships with their teachers, friends, families, and school employees in terms of dimensions of violence grouped into four main themes (physical, emotional, verbal and sexual).

**Ethics:** Written permission for the interviews was obtained from the school administration. The students that would be participating in the research and their families were informed and their verbal consent was obtained about the study. The parents that did not wish to have their child participate were asked to inform the school

administration of this. No negative feedback, however, was received.

#### **Results**

Of the students at the school for the visually impaired, 66.7% were in the 13-16 age group and 57.1% were boys. Students with congenital vision impairment comprised 85.7% of the pupils; 14.3% had developed impairment later on in their lives.

#### **STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF VIOLENCE**

##### **THEME 1. DEFINITION OF VIOLENCE**

**Sub-concepts:** Quarreling, beating, demeaning, offending, teasing

**Sub-texts:** I lived through violence, I saw violence, I experienced violence. Violence is very upsetting and my emotions are affected negatively.

Nineteen students responded to the question as to what violence meant by stating, "to quarrel with someone, to beat someone." Four students defined violence by "offending someone and making somebody unhappy"; three students said, "demeaning someone, insulting or getting angry at someone." Two of the students said they did not know the definition of violence.

One student stated that a teacher using force on a student was the definition of violence.

B14girl: *"For instance, a teacher calls a student up to the board, asks a question and the student doesn't know the answer. The teacher says, 'I'll hit you on the hand with the ruler'--I think that's violence."*

One of the students defined violence as negative behavior expressed in a few dimensions.

A15girl: *"For instance, it's violence when a man beats up a woman or beats up his wife. It can also be a teacher hitting a student. A mother slapping a girl or a boy. Violence could also be screaming. In other words, it's bad, anything that's bad."*

# STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE

## THEME 2. EXPERIENCES WITH PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

Sub-concept: beating

Beating sub-text: Mother and father customarily engage in fighting.

Nine students said they had gotten into fights, hit others and been hit by others. One of the students confided that his father, another that his mother, still another that his step-mother beat him; in general, students said that they fought with their friends and siblings. The students who mentioned fighting accepted that beating someone was an ordinary practice. For example:

M13boy: *"He's spoiled and he's always acting up. So I have to beat him."* (his brother)

Ö13boy: *"When we're playing together, he does something mischievous and when I ask him why he does that, we get into a fight and I spank him, I'm forced to, really."* (his cousin)

Z14girl: *"Like sometimes we see something on TV and we laugh at it together, and then he asks why we're laughing and he hits me. For example, he once kicked me in the head."* (her father)

F14boy: *"He acts unevenly toward me. When he gets mad, for instance, he throws whatever he can find at me. So then I get mad and when I'm angry I start hitting him."* (his brother)

## THEME 3. EXPERIENCES WITH VERBAL ABUSE

Sub-concepts: insult, teasing, demeaning

Sub-texts: although it's a usual custom, it's still upsetting to hear insults and teasing from elders and peers. The disabled can make mistakes and they should not be demeaned because of these mistakes.

Eight of the students reported experiences with verbal abuse. One of the students said he had been insulted by his older sister, two others by a teacher, one by a friend, and another by a grandfather. For example:

Z14girl: *"I don't like her, she yells at us, sometimes she says we're lazy."* (her teacher)

A student, who reported that he had been demeaned by the dormitory attendant because he mixed up his clothes due to his impairment, expressed this incident as follows:

S13boy: *"He says to me, 'You're a big boy now.' OK, so I'm a big boy but I can get confused sometimes. I'm blind, after all. What can I do? The same thing happens after we come out of the shower sometimes. I don't want him to get mad at me. It upsets me."*

## THEME 4. EXPERIENCES WITH EMOTIONAL ABUSE

**Sub-concepts:** being abandoned, feeling excluded, feeling deprived, feelings of unworthiness

**Sub-texts:** The visually impaired can be abandoned, they're gullible, they might bring bad luck, and they can be made to beg.

Thirteen students related their experiences with emotional abuse. Three of the students expressed their sadness about being away from their mothers and being unable to speak to them. For example:

İ9girl: *"Like I said before, she's my 'old' mother because she abandoned me and I don't love her. I heard she was fighting with my father, and she was beating me. (Said in a whisper) If she hadn't left me, I would still have wanted her, but I don't because she left me."*

Five of the students spoke of their feelings of worthlessness and one said the following:

A15girl: *"He doesn't even walk me to the front door. And there's another exit there--it opens out into the opposite direction--he tricks me and doesn't lead me to the right door. I don't know whether he's tricking me on purpose or why else he's doing it."* (driver of his service bus)

While one student spoke about how her aunt was very negative about her future, another student said that her mother thought

that he had brought the family bad luck, also adding that he agreed with her:

Z14girl: *"My aunt keeps telling my father that when I'm grown, I'll be causing him a lot of trouble, that he should be prepared and that I will be causing his ruin just like my mother did. So sometimes because of this, my father calls me the plague of his life."*

D12boy: *"My mother says that I bring them bad luck. She says that before I came into the world, everything was fine, but that once I came, everything started going bad. And how do I feel about it? I agree with my mother. Because nothing goes right, I want to go home but I can't and there's always something happening to me."*

One of the students explained how her father was exploiting her by making her beg on the streets:

Z14girl: *"Let me tell you something. It's good that it wasn't my fault--my father picked up a box and started collecting money with me at his side. I wanted to just leave everything right then and go far away, I didn't care where I went, just so that I escaped from this awful life I'm living. But that didn't happen, I couldn't. My father wouldn't let me."*

One of the students complained about his father's disinterest and his not coming home at night while five other students expressed the fear they felt when the adults at home quarreled and got mad at them for various reasons. One of the children said the following:

S16boy: *"The teacher got mad at me. I was very scared. I felt heartbroken."*

Two students talked about the disappointment they experienced in some situations. One student said the following:

D12boy: *"For instance, in the beginning my mother said, 'OK, I'll come to pick you up.' But then she never did. It's always like this; sometimes she says it again. Then she says, 'We'll see, son, we'll come to pick you up.' And then it's 'We'll see,' again and I wait for them that day and they never show up..."*

**HOW STUDENTS BEHAVE WHEN THEY ENCOUNTER VIOLENCE**

**THEME 5. WHAT IS EXPERIENCED AFTER BEING SUBJECTED TO VIOLENCE**

Sub-concepts: Sadness, sad reaction, concealment

Sub-texts: even if violence makes you sad, it can be concealed, it can be ignored.

When students were asked what they do when they witness violence, seven said they did nothing, that they shared this experience with no one but felt bad themselves and very sad.

I9girl: *"Sometimes I've felt bad, sometimes I just pretend I didn't see it. I get upset when they scold me, I get very sad..."*

Five students said they would answer violence with violence. One student said that she would never be able to share the experience with anyone if she were sexually molested.

A15girl: *"If I ever experience that, I would just get out of there and share it only with someone I really trust. Maybe I wouldn't be able to tell anybody that somebody touched me."*

### **Discussion**

Although children encounter acts of violence very frequently, the fact that most of these crimes do not come out in the open makes it difficult to know exactly what children think about these situations. Conducting research on how disabled children perceive violence and what their experiences are is important in terms of preventing and fighting against violence. This will make preventing potential psychological problems possible and will provide guidelines for professionals who work with these psychological issues. In-depth interviews were conducted in this study with visually impaired secondary school students. The students' perceptions of violence, their experiences and their reactions to violence were analyzed with respect to their families, friends, teachers and school employees.



It was found in the meta-analysis of a study with disabled children, children with impaired vision among them, which was conducted for the purpose of determining the risk of violence and how prevalent it was among disabled groups of children, that the disabled were more likely to be subjected to violence by their healthy peers, and also by their family members, caretakers, adults and peers (17). All of the students in this study as well similarly stated that they had been victims of violence and that this behavior came from their families, school employees, teachers and peers.

Nineteen students in the study defined violence as quarreling or beating someone. Four students defined violence by "offending someone and making somebody unhappy" while three students said it was, "demeaning or insulting somebody or getting angry at someone." Similarly, Deveci et al. (2008) reported in their study that when students were asked "What is violence?" among other definitions, 45 students defined it as quarreling, 38 as beating someone, 21 as behaving badly to someone, 17 as cursing someone, 13 as screaming at someone, 9 as offending someone, and 7 as using physical force (3). In a study by Dedeoğlu et al. (2008), similar results were again revealed when the researchers quoted the students in the study as saying that the first things they perceived as violence were acting forcibly in particular, and also speaking or behaving coarsely, and physically attacking (4). Most of the students pointed to physical or emotional violence, referring less to other forms of abuse. This may be because the students felt more comfortable speaking of physical violence as opposed to sexual abuse and also because physical violence was more comprehensible to them than verbal abuse.

In their research, McDonald et al. (2011) observed that almost all of the students in their study had encountered violence at some point in their lives (23). In

studies conducted in various countries, it is reported that the rate of experiencing physical violence in adolescence is between 13%-27% (24, 25). Dedeoğlu et al. (2008) found in their study that the types of violence students encountered was distributed as 52.2% verbal abuse, 21.9% physical abuse, and 23.7% emotional violence (4). Özönder (2005) stated that students mostly encountered verbal abuse (21). This study showed that students referred to emotional abuse the most. The study also revealed that physical forms of violence such as beating someone or being beaten were the most frequently experienced acts of violence among the students. It has been shown in various studies that students experience physical violence to a great extent (7, 22, 26, 27). The present study showed that among the concepts of verbal abuse, the students more frequently mentioned insults, name-calling and teasing in their statements. Other studies have also shown similar references to verbal abuse (21, 27). The reason that emotional abuse was more commonly seen in this study may be because of the children's disability. The words of a disabled student in one study support our findings in the present research: *"I am no longer in school because the other children make fun of me and say I'm a half person so I left school. Yes, even until now, I very much want to go to school, but my friends make fun of me at school, that I am incomplete. It is this very reason that my dad had made me leave school."* Boy with a disability, Guinea (28).

The students in the study stated that they experienced violence in their families, from their teachers and from their friends. Studies indicate that a child's risk of encountering violence at home or at school may increase because of steadily growing needs that can lead to a lack of adequate social support given to the child's caretaker, the child's difficulties with communicating, increasing security shortcomings, and similar factors (29). It is reported that

disabled children experience more physical violence, bodily harm and the use of force at the hands of their parents, compared to other children (26). In fact, studies show that receiving the support of parents and peers is decidedly important in increasing wellness among adolescents (30).

Students mention beating up someone or being beaten up as among their experiences with physical violence and in the case of verbal abuse, the most common type they refer to is being made fun of, name-calling and insults. It has been found that while verbal abuse is more common with the visually impaired, sexual abuse is not a common experience. In research conducted with 7th and 8th-graders, however, Özönder (2005) found that 24.7% of the students in the study had been victims of sexual abuse (21). Research at Turkish Social Services and Child Protection Agency (SHÇEK) by Oral-Korkmazlar et al. (2010) revealed no cases of sexual abuse. The fact that the results of the SHÇEK study are similar to those of the present research suggests that perhaps because the children involved belonged to a special group of children, they were more protected than usual. There might also be cultural factors playing a role in the absence of children's reports of sexual abuse. In particular, it is thought that the well-established belief in Turkish culture that "some things must be kept a secret" may be influential in the individual's attempt to maintain secrecy (7).

### **Conclusion**

Students mostly reported beating and being beaten rather than other forms of physical violence; their experiences with verbal abuse were mostly in the form of being teased, called names and being insulted. It was found that the statements about verbal abuse referred to jibes about their being sight-challenged and that they had not experienced any form of sexual abuse. It has been determined that disabled children encounter violence in a manner similar to those who are not impaired.

However, it may be said that the combination of communication barriers, lack of self-confidence and the inability of these children to access information about their rights puts this group at a significant disadvantage in many respects, not only resulting in the many issues they encounter, but also placing them in a position in which they need more help than others in finding solutions to their problems. In this context, it is of vital importance that school nurses, families and the whole of society be sensitive and aware of the needs of this disadvantaged group.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Our recommendations are that research should be carried out to determine the factors at play when disabled children experience acts of violence;

A scale to probe into matters of violence should be devised specifically for disabled individuals;

School nurses and community mental health nurses should be included in in-house programs on violence; and

Students should be provided personal consulting services to educate them in how to protect themselves from violence.

### **LIMITATIONS**

Since the research was based on interviews, no intervention was possible at the actual time of the incidents of violence. The school administration was later informed about these incidents.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The authors thank all of the participants in this research as well as the nursing interns Sema Arslan, Fadime Doğan and Nazmiye Aydın, who assisted with data collection and reporting.

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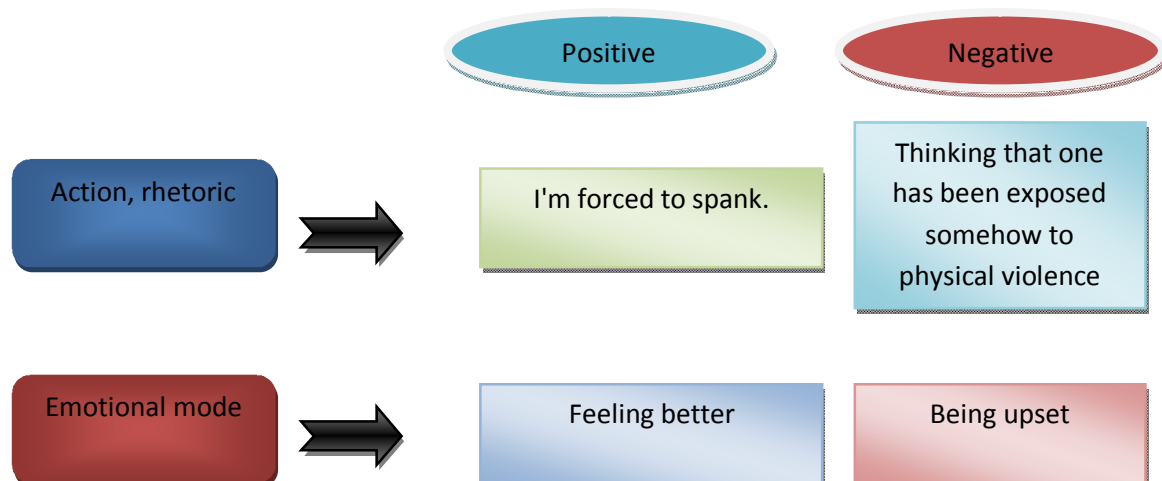
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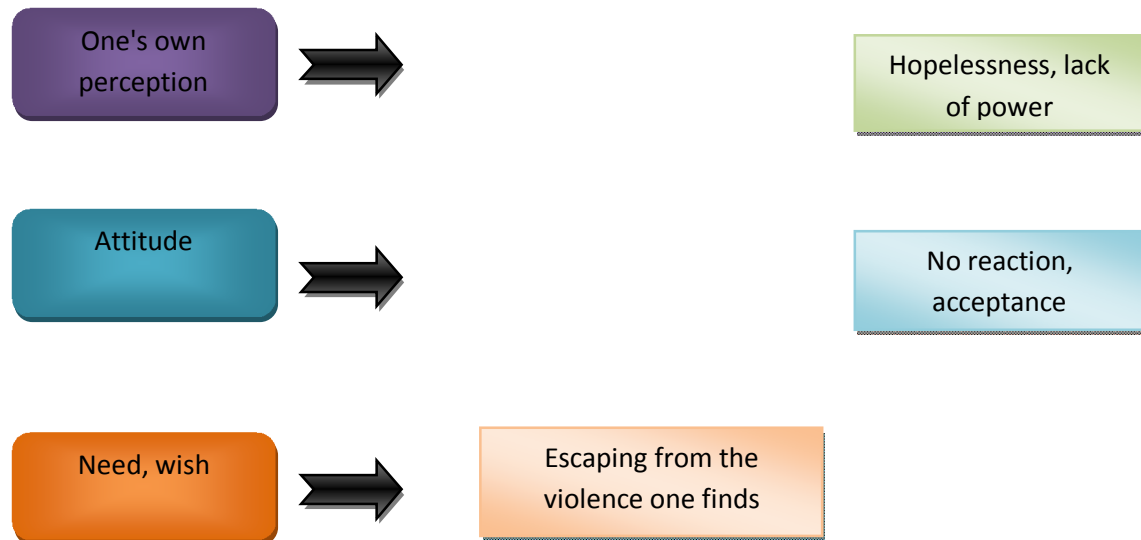
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**Figure 1. Conceptual Demonstration of Experiences of Physical Violence**





**Figure 2. Conceptual Demonstration of Experiences of Physical Violence**

