

Symbolic violence in the school curriculum

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Abstract

Aim: This study aimed to identify symbolic violence and its exemplars in the Iranian school curricula via interviews and thematic analysis. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, the interviewees were purposively selected from among faculty members and curriculum planning, educational psychology, and sociology of education experts. The data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews. The adequacy of the research sample and the quality of the data and interpretations were ensured via a combination of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The reliability of interview coding was determined using the intra-class correlation coefficient of kappa. The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's three-step model. The results showed that symbolic violence can be applied to all elements of the curriculum. As an instrumental component of the educational system, schools unintentionally reproduce individual and social inequalities through the curriculum.

Keywords: *Symbolic violence, Curriculum, Reproduction theory*

Introduction

The concept of symbolic violence was proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, who defines it as a type of violence imposed with the tacit complicity of people who are subjected to this violence and those who impose it because neither group is aware of this imposition (Bourdieu, 1996/2008: 25). Symbolic violence is "quiet and tacit" and manifests itself in an invisible form through socially and culturally accepted internal meanings. Therefore, it is not considered unfair or against social interactions, and is understood by the subject in an unspoken and usually imperceptible manner. Prejudices, humiliation, and discrimination are regarded as severe acts of violence since the suffering they cause is not socially unfair (Riscal et al., 2016).

Symbolic violence is theoretically based on reproduction theories, in which dominant groups are believed to reproduce inequalities of power, income, and social status. Reproduction theories are divided into cultural and social forms (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Based on Antonio Gramsci's (1891-1937) theory of hegemony, the domination system transforms its preferred culture into the culture of the masses through mass media, the church, schools, and family (Strinati, 1996/2001). Inspired by the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, Herbert Marcuse, and especially Paulo Freire, Henri Giroux (1983) introduces the concept of resistance and believes that students' resistance is always shaped against the manifest and latent curricula of the educational system. Reproduction and resistance theories offer two different approaches to explaining the influence of schools on different social strata. Freire believes that education should promote students' awareness so that they can take an active, and

not a passive stand towards the world (Freire et al., 1998). According to McLaren (1985), schools should become places to develop critical knowledge as well as social and political action.

According to James, an education researcher, even the best schools impose violence in different ways. When educational rules and regulations are formulated and enacted without the participation of students, or when the school curriculum is scheduled without addressing students' needs and only based on adults' opinions, this per se is a promotion of violence (James, 2000: 43).

Methodology

The present study examined symbolic violence in the Iranian school curriculum through a qualitatively thematic approach. The research domain is the curriculum of Iranian schools. According to the research topic—curriculum, educational psychology, and sociology of education, the statistical population comprised faculty members, education experts, curriculum experts, educational psychologists, and sociologists, who were purposively selected. Theoretical saturation was reached with 15 interviewees. Field data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews started using the qualitative approach, by posing some general questions about symbolic violence in the curriculum of elementary schools as the interview guide, which served as the initial framework for starting the interviews. The next questions were formed based on the interviewees' answers and were developed in the course of the interviews. The greatest weight of the interview questions was allocated to symbolic violence in the school curriculum and its examples. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's three-step model (2006) as follows:

Step 1) Analysis and description of texts and interviews

Step 2) Description and interpretation of texts and interviews

Step 3) Combination and integration of texts and interviews

To measure the adequacy of the research sample and ensure the quality of the data and interpretations, a combination of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability strategies was used.

To calculate coding reliability, some interviews were randomly selected and the codes assigned by two coders were compared. Then, inter-class correlation Kappa was used to determine the reliability of coding.

Results

The results revealed that symbolic violence can be observed in all elements of the curriculum:

- In curriculum objectives: The development of objectives based on the dominant culture, ideology, and thinking of society in the educational system
- In curriculum content: Ignoring diversity in the design of the curriculum content and the adaptation of all students to a single program despite their differences
- In curriculum implementation environment: Affective harm, lack of participation opportunity for everyone, differences in facilities and access, lack of standard and uniform facilities in all regions and schools, disproportion between textbook volume and instruction hours, human resources' professional competence, and the social atmosphere of the school
- In teaching-learning strategies: The teacher serving as a representative of power in the classroom and not using active teaching methods
- In evaluation methods: Inappropriate assessment methods and failure to attend to students' individual differences

Discussion and conclusion

Besides the spread of violence in society, these forms of violence can hinder the path of social evolution and prevent the realization of individual and social goals. It can also have different consequences for the perpetrator of violence, the victim, and others (observers or mediators). In this sense, a deep and comprehensive study of violence prevention in schools appears vital. Contrary to the general belief, violence is not limited to physical conflicts; rather, it includes wider layers of human behavior, an example of which is symbolic violence.

The outcome of these factors for students' minds and spirits is the training of students with a rebellious and disobedient spirit, a sense of inferiority, and lacking self-confidence and self-esteem.

According to the results of this study, education officials are advised to consider developmental dimensions, needs, respect for students' individual differences, ethnicities, and micro-cultures in curriculum planning (goals, content, teaching, and assessment methods). It is recommended that school executives and educational staff prevent the reproduction of inequalities in school by allowing everyone to participate in decision-making, equality in access to facilities, respecting students' individual characteristics and differences, applying active teaching methods, promoting students' group activities, creating equal opportunities according to students' individual differences and intellectual, social, cultural, emotional, and economic backgrounds, using punishment or reward correctly, preventing the violation of students' right in assessments, and preventing discrimination among students.

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