

Teachers and School Violence. A Comparative Study of Danish, American and Polish Phenomena.

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Abstract: *The goal of this paper is to examine consequences of diversity in understanding of school violence from country to country. After a short description of each case some questions about its consequences and specific group interests will be raised. From the given examples it might be concluded that the will to bring opinions to the public depends on the shape of the state. Teachers, as well as all other workers, must feel socially secure if we want them to represent a democratic approach towards their work.*

1. Introduction

There are many things that would be good to discuss when it comes to education. Nevertheless, it is hard to draw public attention to broad issues and never-ending discussions like "What is the purpose of schooling nowadays?". But the term "public attention" basically means media attention nowadays and it partly explains the failure in bringing discussions to the people in democratic countries. The only educational topics that can survive on the agenda, are those formulated as news. That is why, it is not surprising that it is almost impossible to talk about school and youth without bringing up the problem of violence.

Though fear is needed to mobilise the audience, the meaning of school violence differs from country to country. It is not the author's intention to level differences between forms of violence. The goal of this paper is to examine consequences of this diversity. A special attention to the relation between discourse practices and the role of teachers will be given.

Due to the author's Polish background and perpetual changes in educational policy in Poland, the research are

based on examples from: the USA (because this country serves as an ideal model of development in Poland), Denmark (because its educational solutions are simply ignored in public debates in Poland) and Poland (to highlight the battlefield).

2. Analytical framework

The research will be based on secondary data sources, i.e. Internet available articles from newspapers, Wikipedia articles covering specific issues, as well as on the field literature. In order to describe connections between publicly used language and social changes, i.e. educational changes, parts of the Critical Discourse Analyse approach will be employed. That means, collected texts will not be analysed that much linguistically or semiotically as by the reactions that they have provoked (Fairclough 1995). On the other hand, analysing issues that are a common ground in different countries' education, e.g. teachers' professionalism, will be possible by using comparative education approach (Kubow, 2007).

The chosen examples of school violence might not be the most popular cases in terms of statistics and they did not even bring the biggest public interest. But they seemed to be representative for each country, because similar cases do not appear at all or just do not appeal any public attention in two other countries. After a short description of each phenomenon, with public reactions and main players involved, some questions about consequences and specific interests will be raised. Out of these analyses, which will help to understand differences in defining teachers' professionalism in each country, conclusions will be driven.

3. Key definitions

To make the problem of defining violence open, it must be clear that violence is understood broadly as any form of aggression, both physical and oral, including: suicide, victimization, fights, assaults, bullying etc. (Krauss 2005;

Lawson 2005) What is more, school violence is something that take place at school place, as well as in other places if in connection with school life.

The concept of teachers' professionalism is the key to the understanding the quality of teacher's work. Following Kubow (2007, 209) it can be assumed that

"professionalism describes the relationship between a given society and a certain set of workers. Teacher professionalism is reflected when a society vests authority in teachers who accept responsibility for rendering particular expertise and service. Teacher professionalism, however, involves more than teaching subjects or implementing instructional methods and activities. It also encompasses the deeper understanding that teachers posses about how classrooms and schools are structured and why, as well as how teaching and learning might be structured differently to better meet the needs of students and societies."

It is worth mentioning that in this paper the name of the concept will be used in plural form, i.e. teachers' professionalism, to underline that no teacher can be left behind. (Paraphrasing the name of a controversial federal law in USA called No Child Left Behind, which was supposed to increase the quality of schools.)

4. The case from the USA

4.1 The Virginia Tech massacre

An American speciality on the field of school violence is shooting. It has its own tradition, which means that perpetrators often refer to previous performances. One of the biggest shooting happened on the 17th of April 2007, when a 23-year-old student brought automatic pistols into the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. As a result 32 people died. The perpetrator had left the message for media in which, as Johnson explains, "Cho [the killer] linked himself to Jesus Christ and expressed his hatred of the wealthy" (as cited in Wikipedia n.d.a).

Besides, he has mentioned that some previous massacres he had taken as a model for his own.

4.2 Reactions

According to Campus Security Magazine, as a result of this massacre security procedures and quality of mental health support services were re-examined on many campuses (as cited in Wikipedia n.d.a). Procedures that allowed the mentally unsound man to buy a gun were also reviewed. The case renewed debate on firearm ban, because nobody had been allowed to carry firearms on the campus, even if they had a weapon permit. There were many non-political actions taken at the campus and in the whole country with a goal to pay a tribute to the victims of the massacre and organising a financial support for them.

4.3 Main players

Due to limited access to American reality an identification of players involved in expressing their opinions is based mostly on the Wikipedia article which covers the case. Basically every taken action in connection to the case could be reported. The massacre had a strong media coverage, because of the killer's digital manifesto. Even American President had to say his word about the problem of possessing firearms. Pope offered his condolences. Campus administrators have written some reports. Students have formed a nationwide group in support of the law, which would allow them to bring legal weapon on the campus in order to self-defence. Besides, from the information that some parents “called for Virginia's governor to relieve the university president and campus police chief of their positions.” (Wikipedia n.d.a) a simple conclusion can be drawn that: (a) there was a special police on the campus and (b) some parents tried to pressure authorities. The only group that did not publicly express their opinion was teachers.

Nevertheless, since such incidents are heavily covered by media, American educators are obliged to refer to shootings every time they want to talk about less spectacular forms of school violence, e.g. bullying. In the atmosphere of fear it is hard to define violence as a health problem (Krauss 2005) or to say that the overall number of attacks in statistics is rather low (Barbanel 2005). Some scholars felt obliged to say that in Europe 200 years ago the acts of violence were even more cruel than nowadays in the USA (Midlarsky, Klain, 2005, 39). And finally, that there are some paradoxes in fighting the violence. According to DeFour, so called no violence tolerance policies usually target schools in Latino and Black communities, whereas “the incidents that have placed school violence in the headlines across the country were acts committed almost entirely by white males.” The Virginia case was an exception (the killer had Korean origins) among other from the list of shootings (Wikipedia n.d.b).

4.4 Consequences

On the one hand, it is hard for teachers to react on violence if there is a sudden accident. It seems that American teachers have problems with expressing their voice, even though many other groups, like students or parents, have managed to take part in the discussions. The problem of violence, defined more in terms of security, than a public health issue, is not something that happens, but there are some daily police-like measures taken as well. And it seems that only in the long-run a criticism from the scholars from the field of education arises. Thus, there are some visible signs of individual reflections among professionals, but it is not accompanied by discursive interaction (compare with Kubow 2007, 253). Incoherent actions might also be understood in a more structural way, as for example Kubow (2007, 254) claims: "In the United States, discourse about education and educational reform seems to be occurring increasingly at the state and federal levels; meanwhile, teachers' voices at the local levels are often marginalized from the larger discourse." The lack of voice from the so called grass-root level used to be explained

as if teachers needed some kind of encouragement or a “calling” (Kubow 2007, 254). However, the strategy of trying to be invisible in front of the public opinion seems to be rational when it is taken under the consideration that: (a) teachers are not autonomous workers anyhow, because their jobs are low paid, and (b) keeping a job is a necessary condition for receiving health care in the USA. Thus, in discussions about education the only voices that are audible come from those people, who do not have a job to lose (e.g. parents or students) or they are paid for voicing their criticism (e.g. journalists, scholars and politicians).

5. Two cases from Poland

The access to firearms is still relatively restricted in Poland. Thus, the cases of school violence are not a result of individual people actions. Usually it takes more people to be involved in violent act to turn a human being into a victim.

5.1 The wastebasket on the teacher's head

In September of 2003 one of the TV stations broadcasted a movie on which 17 and 18-years-old students of a technical collage in Toruń harassed their teacher for the 45 minutes of the English lesson. The movie was recorded by one of the perpetrators. The teacher did not even try to leave the class, despite of: his desk being turned upside down, his bag and register book being stolen, students' physical aggression and threats, sex offers and sex simulations, a constant oral aggression, attempts of deafened him by the noise of mobile phones, and... the wastebasket being put on his head (Gazeta Wyborcza 2003).

5.2 The Ania's suicide

On the 21st of October 2006, a 14-years-old girl has committed suicide in Gdańsk. It came into light very quickly that she has been sexually attacked by 3 boys from her class. The attack took place in the school, in the class, during the lesson time, in front of all members of her class.

Nobody called any teacher (the one who supposed to be there had suddenly left the class for 20 minutes), and the incident was filmed by using a mobile phone (Dziennik Bałtycki 2007).

5.3 Reactions

It seems that nobody was ready when the first incident took place. As an answer for a public wrath, some schools introduced policies against using mobile phones in class. Public opinion was also surprised by the relatively young age of the victim. Until then, the old teachers were considered as those, who were burnt out and unable to find a common language with youth. From then on, it was often expressed that, simply, wrong people become teachers nowadays. Besides, the phrase “to put a wastebasket on sb's head” became popular in a discourse. By using it, people expressed their concerns about the state of education and their fears of young people in general. The call for more discipline was coming to schools.

The second case has appeared when the populists were in power in Poland and the post of the Minister of Education was taken by the leader of a far-right party. The new policy called “zero tolerance for the violence in school” was ready and the Minister have used media spin around the tragedy as a vehicle for his proposals, which were publicly presented in the victim's school two weeks after the suicide. The 15-point programme included: a ban on spreading pornography, means for ruthless hunting on drug dealers and procurers, regulations that make dismissing of unreliable teachers easier than before, schools being obliged to determine a proper dress for their students, a new hierarchy of punishment and awards for students, restrictions for juvenile in public places after 10 p.m. etc. (Wikipedia n.d.c) The crisis that has been constructed out of the tragedy have made legal changes possible. It did not really matter if the applied solutions were solving any of the existing problems in schools. The legislative and, subsequently, social changes were made and thus, it will be very hard to defuse the core of

the no tolerance programme, which consists of the set of associations criminalising the youth.

5.4 Main players

In both cases it was media that brought students' actions on the agenda. Nobody would ever thought that it was possible to harass a teacher so severely, until there were students so proud of that, that they have made a movie about it. And it seems that three boys wouldn't be arrested in Gdańsk, if there were no suicide. When the second incident has happened some politicians were ready with their own solutions. Teachers voiced their opinions individually. Because of the programme zero tolerance and several other interventions of the right-wing Minister of Education, there was a noticeable increase of youngsters involved in politics.

5.5 Consequences

If we acknowledge after Kubow (2007, 238-239) that peer support and collaboration are one of the indicators of a democratic orientation in the professionalism of teachers, then the case of the alone teacher with the wastebasket on his head is even more alarming than it seemed from the first sight. Being passive in front of the aggression can be a sign that teachers in Poland assume their own individual responsibility so deeply, that it discourages them to act together to solve problems. It is worth to remember that the victimised teacher was criticised for the lack of personal skills and nobody had known about his problems until the movie was broadcast. The reason for the lack of collaboration between teachers may be founded on a deeper level of socio-economic changes in Poland, because an overall union density in the country has decreased dramatically from 53, 1% in 1989, through 32, 9% in 1995, until 14, 7% in 2001 (Visser 2006 as cited by Blanchflower 2006) and it stays on a very low level in the Education sector, too.

When there is a void and there are any organised actors raising their voices, politicians are allowed to construct their own solutions. The program called zero tolerance for violence in schools introduced by the Polish Minister of Education was based on American experiences. It was recognised as an attempt to militarise schools and to criminalise whole youth (Giroux n.d.). Nevertheless, there was hard to hear any other possible solutions for the school problems.

6. The case of Denmark

6.1 Calling teacher “pedo”

On the antipodes to American example there is a case from the much safer country, but even there the problem of school violence is highly on the agenda nowadays. In January 2008, the 11-year-old boy from the Hellebæk School, called his teacher a “pedo”, which is a short from “pedophile”. He did that in the Internet, on the chat service for youth. Teachers wanted the boy to be expelled from the school (Politiken 2008).

6.2 Reactions

Local authorities had to intervene and they decided to move the boy to the parallel class. Despite of that and student's apologies, it was not enough. Teachers insisted on expelling the youngster from the school and on the 15th of January 2008 they have organised a 2-hour strike in order to publicly show their discontent and to achieve their goal. They demanded new law to protect their reputation in the broadened public sphere, which the Internet consists. It does not really matter if the act of violence appeared in a school or in the Internet, if it is made by a 11-year-old student or by an adult. In the Internet message stays forever. As a result it may be assumed that public opinion became more aware how difficult is to be a teacher in the modern world.

6.3 Main players

Unlike in a previous case, there were teachers who have initiated the media spin. They have stood together defending their interests, even though the case could be easily presented as a problematic one, because public opinion is very sensitive in the field of sexual abuses in recent years. Local authorities were in troubles, because this unexpected educational issue was not directly regulated by any law.

6.4 Consequences

In spite of the fact that Danish schools suffer from traditional forms of violence (Weiss, 2008), similarly to the countries all around the world (International Labour Organization, 2008), teachers there are able to build awareness of their working conditions. It was possible, because, in contrary to USA and Poland, teachers in Denmark are highly unionised (Blanchflower 2006). They have the power to address the most stressful issues in their working place. It might be argued that Denmark is by the definition, i.e. welfare state, much more open for a wide discussions about the school life, because the high quality of education is a key component of the social order there. Nevertheless, as a result of both: favourable circumstances and self-organisation Danish teachers as professionals can be seen as decision makers, e.g. going on strike, and problem solvers, e.g. expelling the student. It is hard to conclude whether the proposed solution was appropriate or not, but it was radical enough to draw public attention towards a single school from which the call for a new legislation was expressed.

7. What we can learn out of school violence?

It might be controversial to look upon the quality of teachers' work through the lenses of accidents that they have had almost no influence on. But it seems to be crucial for the quality of the services if this special kind of workers take part in defining issues that, eventually, they are going to work on.

The cases from USA and Denmark were in a way similar, because both of them have provoked people to rethink problems of safety. Though, in American case it was the problem of a school as a safe place to be, and Danish example defined school as a safe place to work. Whereas the Polish cases have launched discussions about the need for discipline.

It might be surprising how defining and understanding of school violence is contextualised. Much depends on the process of public discussion. From the given examples it might be concluded that the will to bring opinions to the public depends on the shape of the state. Teachers, as well as all the other workers, must feel socially secure if we want them to represent a democratic approach towards their work.

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