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The significance of school culture in elementary schools in terms of organizational development

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the significance of school culture in terms of organizational development depending on instructors' point of view in elementary education schools. In the study, maximum diversity sampling of purposeful sampling method was used. Semi configured interview were taken with 12 teachers work in 6 schools in central Sivas. Interviews were implemented in 18-20 October, 2006. There were six schools in the study. Two of schools were chosen from upper socio economic level, two from semi socio economic level and two from lower socio economic level. In the document analysis, school teachers' committee records, teachers' group record and guardians' meeting records were analyzed. Those documents belonged to the schools and teacher who were interviewed. When the culture characteristics which were categorized by Robbins were applied to school culture, it was observed that managers' behaviors had determining effect on school culture structure. In this study, personal autonomy, structure, support, identity, performance-award, conflict tolerance, risk tolerance characteristics were discussed as school culture characteristic in understanding the school cultural structure, and school development process and the instructors' point of view about the relationship levels between those characteristics and school culture were evaluated.

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1. Introduction

Culture is defined as an enduring and permanent concept (Drucker, 1998:200). Schein defines the culture of a group as : “A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptain and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and , therefore , to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive , think and feel in relation to those problems (as cited in Olkun, 1996 : 567). Robbins defines organizational culture as “a system of shared meaning held by members that distinguishes the organization from other organizations from other organizations. These are the key elements of culture: Personal

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Autonomy, Construction, Support, The Identity, Performance/Prize, Conflict Tolerance, Risk Tolerance” (Robbins, 1994:299, 300).

We must give importance to organizational culture to make the organizations more productive. We can benefit from different variations to change the behaviors of the people who take part in organizations such as: learning, perception, conflict, personality, Identity, performance, motivation, to decide, to lead, climate, health, anxiety, culture (Akt: Çelik ; 1997:2).

School is a big organization that serves for all community. Everybody has taken part in school organization somehow and is still taking part actively. According to Bursalıoğlu (1998), the most important and obvious characteristic of school is having people as the basic input that comes from and goes to community. It puts forwards the school’s organization format more than its personal format and its formality more than its informality. If schools form their own cultures, they can be more permanent. If a school that is different from the others changes and diversifies its own variations, it can be more successful and effective in changing and improving the behaviors of its members. School culture must have characteristic which can discriminate a school from the others, so administrators of schools must be the creators of the applications that will make the school unique. According to Çelikten (1997) powerful school culture comes out as a result of administrators’ and teachers’ coming together with the common norms and beliefs. Powerful school culture prevents harmful subcultures.

Informal groups of school have strong influences, but school administrator must provide these subgroups to be clamped together around school culture. According to Çelikten, school culture simply means that it is the combination of ideals, values, suppositions, beliefs and attitudes that bring the school community together. These facts form the behaviors and experience of people at school strongly and create a common vision with the lead of school management. School administrators create the common and cooperative vision of school with teachers and students. According to Stolp, school culture that is deeply felt and concerns strong traditions, ceremonies, rituals and symbols affects the productivity and satisfaction of teachers and symbols affects the productivity and satisfaction of teachers and students (as cited in Arslan et al., 2005:456)

A strong school culture is very important for schools that want to be effective and develop themselves. Teachers are probably the most important variable especially to change the school culture and create an effective one because principals, assistant principals, families and all the organizations around school observe the teacher as the administrator of teaching-learning activities. If such is the case, what do the teachers pay attention to create an effective school culture and what do they want administrators, officers, students, families, school-family unions and civilian public organizations to do to create an effective school culture? The answers of these questions can be examined from the point of facts that were classified by Robbins (1994) and accepted as the basic organizational culture. These facts are classified like this:

Personal autonomy: Responsibility of the people in organization, independence level and opportunities for personal attempts.

Construction: The level and amount of direct observation, rules and the arrangement that are used to control the behaviors of the responsible.

Support: The level of help and sincerity the administrators provide with the inferiors.

Identity: The level of members becoming identical with the organization instead of their own work groups or Professional province.

Performance/prize: The distribution level of the prizes (rise of the salary, promotion) in organization.

Conflict tolerance: The existent conflict level between the relations of labourers and labour groups and wish to be clear and honest about the differences.

Risk tolerance: The level of being encouraged of the labourers to be active, open minded and to take risk.

These facts that can be used to assess organizational culture can give an idea for organization. If we deal these facts from the point of schools, it is possible to assess them according to the classified criterions. This research aimed to determine the contribution of the culture of elementary schools to school development. Some questions were debated to answer on the basis of the culture that were classified: personal autonomy, construction, support, identity, performance-prize, conflict tolerance, risk tolerance.

Method: In this research, case study, a qualitative research method, was used. To increase the validity of the research, semi constructed interview method and document analysis method were used as the ways of data verification.

Interview forms were presented to the expert's opinions. By making a focus group meeting with 3 teachers interview questions were tested and interview was made. In this qualitative research purposeful sampling was used. According to Soproull, using purposeful samples (peoples or units) are chosen because of the specific characteristics of participants (as cited in Demircioğlu, 2006:54). According to Paton purposeful sampling make the conditions that are thought to have rich source possible for being examined deeply. Purposeful samle methods are mostly useful to discover and explain the phenomenons and events (as cited in Yıldırım&Şimşek, 2005:109). In this research maximum variation samples from purposeful sample methods were used.

Semi constructed interview was made in Sivas with 12 teachers who worked at 6 schools. Interviews were conducted on 18-20 October 2006. Two schools were chosen from upper socio-economic level, two of them were from medium socio-economic level. While document analysis, official reports of school teachers committee, teachers groups and parent meetings were examined. These documents belonged to the teachers who were interviewed and to their schools.

Interviews were recorded by the researcher. Inputs that were gained from the interviews were assessed according to culture features that were classified by Robbins (1994). These are the categories:

- Personal autonomy
- Construction
- Support
- Identity
- Performance/Prize
- Conflict Tolerance
- Risk Tolerance

The inputs of the interviews were assessed under these titles. What effective variables were tried to be identified to develop schools.

2. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the research were assessed under the title of seven patterns. These were classified as personal autonomy, construction, support, identity, performance-prize, and conflict tolerance and risk tolerance.

Personal Autonomy: Personal autonomy is inevitable for the teachers. It is hard for the teachers to perform a teacher role in the class without having autonomy. A teacher style, whatever a teacher does is always controlled is not good. All of the teachers identify that being under control all the time negatively affects to perform a teacher role. For example, Teacher 5 stated that "at this school the administrators rely on teachers very much. We sometimes hear that some administrators at other schools control the teachers. They wait at the Teachers' room door to see whether the teachers go to class or not. I can't bear this unreliance and I lose my motivation."

Teacher 3 and 4 agreed with teacher 5 and they said that they were not pleased with being under control. Teacher 1 emphasized how the autonomy was important for him and he said: "I am not pleased with people who always tell me what I should do. I must be myself so I can love my school and I can work much beter. I don't like being interfered." All the teachers said that actually there was autonomy on the basic of being a teacher and added that it was sometimes forgotten by administrators and inspectors.

Unreliance to the teacher negatively affects the success of the school. After the document research it was proved from the records of teacher committee that teachers come to an agreement and they worked together to improve the success of the students. Some opinions that were related with students' personal and social development took place at these records, too. One of the opinion was that poor students would be identified and school administratory would be allowed to know it and everybody would study together to overcome this problem.

This opinion both reflects the personal autonomy and shows that the construction and hierarchy are paid attention. The inevitable dialogues between teachers, the importance of working cooperatively and teachers' responsible behaviors to improve the problem students take part in the opinions section.

At the records of the teachers committee, assistant administrator revived that there were some problems about going to the class, the warder teacher had to be more careful and he called attention to the insufficiency of the teachers to perform their tasks. It is possible to say that this school is being disciplined externally and it is insufficient to make use of autonomy.

The imperative expressions of the assistant administrator can be assessed as there aren't common beliefs and values between the teachers and the administrators at the school.

Construction: Teachers explain the construction format of school culture with the concepts like hierarchy, role and status. The teacher 12 explains the construction and hierarchy of school like this: "the school's organizational form can not adjust to extreme hierarhic arrangements. We must get into touch somehow but this mustn't mean that there won't be relationship between the administrators and the inferiors. Administrators and the assistant administrators must be directed with the legal responsibility at regular level. School must be directed with the legal arrangements but they shouldn't make the human relations mechanic. Teacher 7, 9, 10 said that in an effective school they paid attention to the senior-inferior relations, irregularities gave harm attention to the senior-inferior relation at their school and they were pleased with it.

The importance of discipline is emphasized as the key to concrete around some common values. Here discipline is perceived as a culture pattern for an effective school. The signature of the administrator was seen at the teachers' committee records and family meeting records from the examined documents. It shows that teachers allow the administrator to know all the tasks they have done. The research showed that five of the nine teachers didn't make the administrator sing the family meeting records. The expression of the administrators at the teachers committee opinion records show that he adopts an importance to construction form in school.

The administrator wants his teacher to complete all the tasks on time. The expression of guide teacher shows anauthoritative relation, too. Guide teacher wants the other teachers to give in the survey and inventory results that are related with guidance in a short time. It can be infered that tasks and procedures are offical and relations are imperative at school. According to Hoy and Miksel , forming an organizational culture is closely related with the leadership behaviors of the administrators (Çelik , 1997:45). To form the school culture, the administrators should take into consideration the beliefs and the values of the labourers.

Support: Administrators should support the teachers but mostly the behaviors are seen in legal format. (All Teachers), Teacher 8, "From time to time I need support not from the point of profession but humanity. I would take pleasure if I were asked whether I had any problems or not but I didn't see it at my school." This expression shows that the teachers aren't supported socially. School culture can be developed as being related with the leadership behaviors of the administrators. The administrators should give importance to the communication style with the teachers at school. Scholl administrators should form new values, norms and beliefs at school and share them with the labourers at school. Actually the teachers that are interviewed called attention to the weak relation style at their schools and this state reduces the level of adoption and being identical with the school. It is possible to conclude from the research that the administrators behave in an imperative manner to form an effective school apart from performing the legal commands at school. The teachers weren't supported. The school administrator expressed at the teachers committee meeting that he would inspect the lessons himself and if the teachers made any mistake about the tasks and the procedures, he would give a start to the legal procedures. These expressions show that the administrator makes the teachers do the tasks by means of legal commands. When compared with the teachers' ideas it is possible to see that the school administrators are not aware of guidance and being supportive. Family meeting records draw attention to be successful. If one of these inputs is insufficient, the school will lose its balance so all the supporters that are related with the school should support each other.

Identity: Teacher 6 expresses his ideas like that: "If we restrict the school life between 08.00 a.m – 15.00 p.m times to perform a task, it is not possible to be identical with the school time; too. We talk about what we can do to develop education and learning. We make joke, we drink tea and eat together. We have lots of things to say for this school. Teacher 7 "If a person can't adapt to the environment he simply can't help. My adaptation to this school is related with the solution of my adaptation problems. He expressed that it was important to be identical with the school and school enviroment. To form an identical sense is very important to creat an effective school. It is possible to see at must of the teacher committee records that mostly the administrators give opinion, teachers aren't willing to talk. They can't examine the meeting subjects deeply. The administrators maket he teachers do imperative tasks. On the basic of legality and written regulations the administrators behave in an imperative manner. There aren't any records at the teachers committee meeting that show the support of administrators to the labourers and any opinions that show teachers' being identical with the school.

Performance/Prize: Performance-prize is accepted as an effective value to creat an effective school culture unless the administrators take part on someone else's side. The common belief for the prize and punishment is that they are personalized. Teacher 3, 6, 7 emphasized that they didn't get any prize or punishment as materialistically and added

that the climate at the school was the biggest social prize for themselves. The other teachers said that the prize weren't given in just and it caused to nervousness and depression.

Conflict Tolerance: All the teachers expressed that the differences about conflict tolerance were the reality of life and this inevitable case created dynamizm at school. They mentioned that conflicts were personalized, there was a focus on political conflicts instead of developing education enviroment and polarizations were seen as conflict element. Teacher 12, “we sometimes have a nice discussion about new teaching programs in the teachers’ room. I usually like them. We come to some good, unexpected conclusions.” From these experiences we undestand the conflict culture. The other teachers mention that most of the teachers share their information and some of them hide and they add that when the information is hidden, the differences can't be discussed. It is mentioned by most of the teachers that the administrators are out of the discussions that are useful for developing schools and the administrators are afraid of conflict as a word. Teachers want the school administrators to visit the classes and teachers room all the time. The expression of some administrators like “I don't want to have problems at this school” makes the teachers feel troubled. After the document researches the expressions of the school administrator who gathers the school committee meeting can be an important clue to explain the importance of school conflict culture. “In the first term of education year we didn't have any problems but some teachers didn't assess the examinations and performance works without taking part on someone's side. Because the administrator introduced the school as if it didn't have any problems, it caused the possible probles not to be discussed. This behavior of the administrator means that s/he doesn't know school conflict culture. Actually “conflict” can be used as a pattern of change and development in school culture.

Risk Tolerance: This research shows that they weren't identical with taking risk as a teacher but they have a positive perspective to take risk as a mean of being openminded. It is emphasized that all these should know and benefit from technology on these changing world conditions. Teacher 6 “we mustn't insist on some opinions and constructions in an must be identical with them. Teacher 5 supported these opinions and said that teachers could take risk. To follow the changes means taking risk and this is a need. We conclude from his expressions that he pays attention to taking risk as a part of school culture. School and administrators are hoped to present the technology to school and teachers must be forced to benefit from it.

As a conclusion, it is possible to assess the cultural features that were classified by Robbins (1994) from the point of organizational development to understand school culture with its all aspects. How the labourers live, to what they call attention, what kind of values, beliefs and hopes they have lead us to undestand school culture.

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