

Full Length Research Paper

Understanding school culture via analyzing organizational stories

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Schools have different cultures specific to themselves. School culture represents dominant values, norms, assumptions, beliefs, stories, ceremonies and symbols shared by the members of a school. The objective in interpreting school culture is to understand the stories and symbols created by the members of this culture. Organizational story is a tool to analyze school culture. This article aims to highlight the relationship between organizational stories and school culture. This discussion has been formed with respect to social constructivism, interpretive organizational symbolism and critical theory. Social constructivism, interpretive organizational symbolism and critical theory constitute a multi-disciplinary perspective for organizational story studies. In present research, qualitative research method has been applied. The attempt has been to analyze total 200 stories obtained from ten primary schools. It has been detected that collected stories mostly reflected negative school culture.

Key words: School culture, organizational stories, organizational learning, analysis organizational stories.

INTRODUCTION

School culture enables a better understanding of organizational behavior. However not each school is supposed to have a positive culture. The stronger the values and norms shared in schools, the stronger influence of culture over school personnel is. A strong school culture elevates academic performance of this school. Throughout schools where organizational commitment is high, a more effective learning environment is created.

The quality of education is related to the quality of school culture. In a negative school culture it is impossible to forge a favorable learning atmosphere. Negative school culture lies on the basis of many problems encountered in schools. There is a close relationship between school culture and school discipline. In a negative school culture, some major disciplinary problems are experienced (Westhuizen et al., 2008). Rise of violence in schools, safety problem, students' exposure to risk and loosening of moral values are all stemmed from negative school culture.

School culture reflects a school's organizational learning culture. Sharing school culture means sharing cultural values, beliefs and stories among school personnel. Sharing organizational stories enables a favorable atmosphere for organizational learning. One of the

methods used in understanding school culture is organizational story analysis. In this research, organizational stories in schools have been analyzed and negative and positive school cultures have been attempted to detect.

Organizational stories

Recently conducted organizational story researches have been a significant method in understanding human experiences. Organizational stories assist in explaining organizational lives and experiences of employees. Coles, (1989) points out that story are attempts of passing thoroughly into someone else's life. Through stories, one can pass into cultural barriers; understand the tendencies and actions of human beings.

Organizational stories emerge from the organization and reflect the norm, values and culture of that organizational context. They are detailed narratives of the past and include particulars about management actions, changes in strategy and employee interactions. Given the organizational culture, context and past, stories provide a plot for employees, a proposal that if they take similar actions they should achieve the same ends as in the

story (Parry and Hansen, 2004: 282).

There are several different methods followed in analyzing organizational stories (Boje, 2001:6). These methods are:

- Deconstruction
- Grand stories
- Microstoria
- Story network
- Intertextuality
- Causality
- Plot
- Theme

In story researches particularly the ones concerning education, personal stories have been used, autobiographical analyses have been conducted and accordingly classroom, school, school and social experiences and behaviors of the teachers, school executives and students have been attempted to classify. Story researches on education have provided a multi-dimensional perspective in solving school problems (Larson, 1997).

Stories are sharing real life experiences through narrating method. At the same time, by assisting to the symbolic presentation of knowledge, Stories can guide actions-in-practice. Stories can provide an opportunity for future leaders to examine experiences and practices. The subtleties and nuances of personnel relations, organizational culture, values and beliefs, rituals and myths, take on more meaning as they are presented in stories. In daily activities, executives may sometimes be forced to take quick decisions. Certain concepts and principles may fall abstract in explaining the events. Organizational stories may be viewed as a more specific event assisting in decision making process (Danzing, 1999).

Leadership stories

Leadership stories are considered as a dimension of professional socialization. These stories can be at the same time viewed as an inseparable part of professional development. In traditional education paradigms, theoretical knowledge is more commonly handled. Organizational stories highlight application process rather than theory. Within in-service training of school executives, leadership stories are employed. Leadership stories present events such as drama and reflect the characteristics of school principal. Gardner, (1995) analyzed organizational stories under three groups:

- Stories about the self
- Stories about work group
- Stories about meaning and values.

Leadership stories are important messages conveying

the success of leader to the followers. Stories are important also in the sense that they reflect feelings of the leader. Stories told about the school principal give critical hints about the background of these principals.

Analysis of organizational stories helps interpreting leadership behaviors of school principal. However not every story may be adequate in analyzing school culture. The stories have to stick to a standard. Organizational stories are supposed to be meaningful and convincing and enable alternative interpretations. We are supposed to answer the questions below concerning the stories to use in analyzing the behaviors of teachers and school principals: What gives the story power? What makes the story believable? What is the core problem? What is the resolution? Such questions do not only help in analyzing the stories but they also highlight decision making and action interpretation.

Organizational stories need to be analyzed in line with certain criteria. In analyzing stories that have not been based on criteria, serious difficulties may be faced with. Organizational stories should have six common basic elements which are (Reissman, 1993: 18-19).

- Abstract (a brief summary of the story)
- Orientation (time, place, situation and participants)
- Complicating action (sequence of events)
- Evaluation (the meaning of action, attitude of story teller)
- Resolution (what finally happened)
- Coda (returns the perspective to the present).

According to Boje (2001) one of the criteria of effective story is its followability. Leaders are the people having an influence over observers in interpreting the world. During the times of crisis in an organization, trust towards leader carries great significance. Leaders attempt to evaluate the future for followers and create scenarios for the future. Leadership stories develop new emotional impressions and these emotional impressions direct the future of followers (Parry and Hansen, 2004; Quony, Walker and Bodycatt, 1999).

Stories are symbols offering organizational meanings. The stories attempting to illuminate organizational life can also help us understand other organizational events in the past. Stories guide emotions. Boje (2001) defines stories as components of organizational life and suggests that as a collective rationalization tool, stories set an example for the actions, decisions and assumptions of individuals. Stories help to understand the emotions that lead the experiences of an organization's members (Parry and Hansen, 2004; Boudens, 2005).

The social construction of reality

According to social constructivist approach, organizational stories can be analyzed from different perspectives. Social structure is formed following the interaction of

social reality and symbolic interaction. The reality based on collective experiences is formed with social interactions. Behaviors of an individual are shaped according to the structure of social reality.

Socially structured reality is shared collectively. New reality needs to be compatible with present reality. Unification of a new thing with present reality stems from the idea of legitimization. In legitimization process, basic components of social structure are approved by employees, traditions are institutionalized and present structure is attempted to explain (Boyce, 1996).

Researches explain the relationship between social structure and stories as below:

- Organizational stories enable new members' socialization and unification with the organization.
- Organizational stories help the employees adapt to the environment.
- Story can be vehicle for social control.
- Consciously or unconsciously, stories help to develop certain feelings.

Organizational symbolism

Organizational symbolism may be regarded as a form of understanding the structure. Organizational symbolism tries to explain the ideology, character and value system of the organization. Symbolic approach covers stories, myths, ritualized events, anecdotes and logo of the organization. Organizational symbolism is a concept produced by organizational culture. Organizational symbolism carries functions such as interpreting the symbolic discussions, explaining the plots and meanings of actions.

Studies on organizational symbolism have analyzed symbols in terms of metaphor and based these symbols onto four basic sociological paradigm models. These are functionalist, interpretive, radical humanist and radical structuralist models. Assumptions and approaches of each model are different. Morgan (1986) expanded the discussion of metaphor in *Images of Organization*.

Functional paradigm defined symbol as a tool that sustains social order. Functional paradigm helps in interpreting organizational meanings and process. According to interpretive paradigms, symbols are tools that interpret organizational structure. Interpretive paradigm attempts to understand and interpret present structure. Radical humanist paradigm emphasizes the pathological use of symbol. The metaphor it draws on is the psychic prison metaphor, which focuses on the use of symbol to alienate. Persons are seen as trapped by their own unconscious and conscious social constructs.

Researchers have examined symbolic forms in organizations for evidence of psychic prisons. Radical structuralist paradigm on the other hand suggests that symbols are ideological control of power (Boyce, 1996: 8). The metaphor it draws on is instruments of domina-

tion. Research from this perspective focuses on ways in which dominant social ideologies are sustained. The work of Henry Giroux, (1992) a critical pedagogist, examines the use of popular culture to sustain the dominant ideology.

Organizational symbolism emerged as a concept of organizational culture literature. Organizational stories serve greatly in the symbolization process of culture. On the other hand, organizational stories assist in interpreting the paradigm dominant in organizational environment. It is rather hard to interpret the symbols in organization as pure symbols. Once backed up with stories, symbols based on certain paradigms can be more easily interpreted. Organizational stories attempt to solve the codes of symbolic world.

Critical theory approach

Critical theory is regarded as the third approach in analyzing organizational stories. Researches on critical theory have focused on modernism and postmodernism discussions. Critical postmodernism forces both a macro and micro level of pressure over structure. Critical theory aims to demolish assumptions, expectations, norms, restrictions and language concerning work.

Critical theory criticizes the meaning of work at organizations and the relationship between organizational myths. Administrative ideologies serve in the identification of employee with the organization. Making use of organizational stories in particular, administrative ideologies are tried to strengthen. Focal point of executive ideologies is motivation. Through story telling, issues such as reaching organizational goals, success, motivation and team work are emphasized. Modern administration approach which gives way to fragmentation and alienation aims to create new meanings through stories.

Organizational stories contribute to improving and sustaining organizational culture. Bowles's critique of organizational myth and meaning draws attention to the ways in which myth and story are utilized to promote and to reinforce dominant ideologies. An intellectual and ethical challenge to those working with organizational story flows logically from Bowles's critique (Bowles, 1989). The use of myth and story is not value neutral. Story researchers, managers and practitioners can use story and storytelling in organizations to describe and sustain the current power structure and besides to gain new meanings to the works of employees.

Ethical barriers

The researchers analyzing organizational stories may face different ethical barriers. Organizational stories not only function as a social control but they can also strengthen participation and entrepreneurship. Stories

can also be used as tools to nourish the symbols, empower supervision and distort the meanings. Regarding organizational stories as a tool to strengthen formal structure and its pressure over employees may be viewed as a critical ethical issue.

To what extent do organizational stories reflect the true structure of an organization? These stories may also be used as a brain-washing tool over employees; particularly by formal organizations. On the other hand, organizational stories may condition the employees to follow certain behaviors. Organizational stories that are compiled by researchers may be the stories executives themselves want to spread. In organizations mostly stories that executives like are narrated. However, negative organizational stories may exist as well. Negative organizational stories are generally hidden and kept silenced. As a natural consequence, organizations may present a rosy scenario consisting of merely positive stories.

Organizational learning and stories

Another element contributing to the process of organizational learning is story (Boal and Schultz, 2007). Organizational learning is the process of developing learning capacity of organization members as a team. Sharing of learning experiences facilitates organizational learning. Narrating organizational stories enables double-loop learning.

Organizational stories account for the chaotic experiences and besides lead the actions of practitioners. Stories provide a favorable environment for communication. A story listened by an employee is narrated to other employees; thus these shared stories can assist in understanding the experiences, values and assumptions of employees.

Organizational memory mostly reflects the dominant culture within the organization. Organizational memory values exalted stories. Such stories make it possible for us to share other people's experiences and develop an emphatic approach. Conversely, negative stories forge a different emphatic memory (Abma, 2003; Sims 1999). In terms of organizational learning, stories emphasizing contrasts are equally important as the elevated stories. Negative stories as well can teach important lessons.

Stories are not only a component of informal learning and organizational culture; but at the same time they are an information store. Stories help to establish a bridge between past and present, present and future. Collectively shared stories lay the base for the formation of social learning system (Abma, 2003).

Strategic leaders may forge a new future-oriented vision by using organizational stories. New organizational stories that will be developed by strategic leaders can be regarded as a tool to legitimize past achievements. Strategic leaders attempting to establish a balance

between past and present, order and disorder view organizational stories as an opportunity (Boal and Schultz, 2007; Quong, Walker and Bodycott, 1999; Pentland, 1999).

Smart stories

At schools stories that stress upon success will help developing a strategic perspective. In school development activities, smart stories carry great significance to drive teachers into action. Organizational stories may cover diversified subjects. The message they carry, rather than the way of their emergence, is important. Franey (2002) described stories with strategic importance as smart stories.

Smart stories can be analyzed under three parts. First of all, smart stories can assist in forming a professional learning culture through providing a strategic perspective. Smart stories facilitate forming an effective thinking for the executives. These stories offer a vital information source for problem-solving teams. Thirdly they improve decision taking capacity of employees. Smart stories put a light to future-oriented learning and development process (Franey, 2002). Smart stories are the stories that nourish a school's organizational memory.

As a social system, administration of the transformation process at schools necessitates a transformation in values and beliefs as well. Through the narrated smart stories, values and faith systems of executives and teachers can be changed. Smart stories speed up the transformation process at school and facilitate teachers' espousal for transformation. A story listened by a teacher can change his/her philosophy of life and paradigms.

Stories related to organizational justice

Modern organizational justice theory emphasizes that universal rules on justice take place within a perception framework constituted by employees. Power, position and interest conflicts amongst employees necessitate formation of critical politics on justice. Analysis of organizational stories helps us understand justice policies within organization. In reality, organizational justice is based upon the perceptions of employees. The stories aim to reflect the relationship between political organizational life and justice into an ideal mode (Woodilla and Forray, 2008). Since stories portray power and position conflicts evidently, they are used in organizational justice researches.

Analysis of organizational justice stories provides great clues concerning the organizational socialization process. Examples of justice in organizational life are used throughout political consciousness process. Justice applications carry great significance in gaining organizational citizenship consciousness. Justice applications

applications idealized via story samples direct the behaviors of employees (Wodilla and Forray, 2008). Stories reflect samples that illustrate injustice as well. Stories that explain organizational policies and rules can bring the injustices employees faced in the past to surface.

Stories related to organizational justice in schools may show the type of justice perception forged by the principals over teachers. Favoring of certain teachers by principals, following a biased and ideological attitude negatively influence justice perception of teachers. Once the atmosphere of justice is disturbed, a set of dissimilar violations of rights can be experienced. Unjust applications on organizational justice may sometimes be hidden by principals on purpose. Failure to apply school rules in line with universal justice principles can be manifested via organizational stories.

School culture and organizational stories

School culture is the set of shared values and meanings directing behaviors of the executive and teachers. In addition to a school's values, norms, traditions and symbols experienced stories too contribute to the formation of a school culture. One of the basic qualities of effective school is that it possesses a powerful culture. Each school adds meaning to organizational life via the culture it produces itself (Çelik, 2002).

Schools develop organizational stories that match with their own culture. Stories play major roles throughout the organizational socialization process of newly recruited teachers. By sharing experienced stories at school, teachers compose a collective integration of emotions. Stories may also be used as a tool to share and evaluate rich life of school.

Formal communication at schools represents the formal relationship between the school principals and teachers. At schools informal communication is more prevalent. Stories prepare an atmosphere that enriches informal communication. If strong elements that espouse informal communication are not present; the influence power of communication also diminishes. Informal communication that is supported with organizational stories creates a more powerful influence sphere.

It is possible to assert that the older the history of a school, the older its culture is. A rooted school culture increases the possibility of developing organizational stories (Schoen and Teddlie, 2008). For instance cultural wealth of a school dating back to hundreds of years would be bigger than a school established five years earlier. Positive organizational stories that reflect the achievements of a school can be regarded as the main capital of school culture.

Transferring organizational experiences from generation to generation can be achieved through stories. Stories aim to keep organizational memory constantly alive (Boje, 1991). Organizational memory indicates

learning experiences an organization enjoys during organizational learning process. Just as they learn new information, organizations can also forget outdated information. Via memory, organizations can retrieve past data and make it ready for use.

At schools, there is a direct proportion between the strength of organizational memory and sharing of stories. If the events that take place in schools are transferred to school personnel via stories, the organizational memory of this school does not weaken. According to Danzing (2001), some former problems experienced at schools can help to forge new opportunities. Educational administrator who learns a lesson through organizational stories can develop a future-oriented and effective vision.

METHODS

In present research, story analysis is employed as a qualitative method. In analyzing organizational stories qualitative methods are more commonly preferred. Organizational stories have been collected from ten primary education schools within the borders of Elazığ city center.

Concerning the way to obtain organizational stories, a group work has been conducted together with ten graduate students. Following that, each student has been asked to collect a story from a different primary education school. Total twenty stories have been compiled from each primary education school. Stories have been taken from school principals and teachers. It was assured that each compiled story from any school was composed of different stories.

It was ensured that stories have been prepared in a way to exhibit three main parts as summary, body and conclusion. Interview method has been applied in story collecting. The support of school executives and teachers has been received to collect the stories. "In your opinion what stories are the most interesting ones in terms of school culture?" question has been directed to school principals and teachers. Verbal stories narrated by school principals and teachers have been penned by graduate students. A restriction on plot has not been followed in story telling; the narrator school principals and teachers have been set totally free in their plot choices.

Organizational stories have been collected within the duration of a month. For that purpose, total five interviews have been held in each school. 200 stories that were collected have been analyzed by the researcher via theme analysis method. Each school has been coded with a letter and the organizational stories in this school have been analyzed with respect to their status of reflecting positive and negative school culture.

In this research, theme analysis method has been employed. Theme method is classifying the stories according to the main thoughts and feelings they carry. Theme analysis is not a hierarchical classification. In theme analysis the date, location and type of relationship in stories are not taken into account. In theme method, main theme of stories is analyzed (Boje, 2001; Gabriel and Griffiths, 2004; Czarniawska, 2004). Stories have been attempted to analyze with respect to the theme they cover. Analyzed organizational stories have been shown as percentages with respect to their plots.

FINDINGS

Table 1 indicates the analysis of organizational stories in terms of school culture. Of the total 200 stories that were

Table 1. Analysis of Organizational Stories in terms of School Culture.

Schools	Number of analyzed stories	Depicted school culture		Negative school culture	
		Positive school culture			
		f	%	f	%
A	20	2	1	18	90
B	20	9	45	11	55
C	20	7	35	13	65
D	20	11	55	9	45
E	20	9	45	11	55
F	20	12	60	8	40
G	20	11	55	9	45
H	20	5	25	15	75
I	20	8	40	12	60
K	20	11	55	9	45
Total	200	85	42.5	115	57.5

analyzed, 57.5% reflects negative school culture whereas 42.5% depicts positive school culture. In organizational stories, depiction of negative school culture is more prevalent; however it is viewed that analyzed organizational stories represent a different school culture with respect to schools. It is observed that the most negative school cultures are observed in schools A, C and H. 90% of the stories in school A illustrates negative school culture. Accordingly D, F, G and K schools have a more positive school culture. 60% of the stories in school F reflect positive school culture.

Table 2 illustrates the distribution of stories collected from primary education schools with respect to their plots. Stories collected from primary education schools have been compiled under 13 headings. As the collected stories' distribution with respect to their plots is analyzed, it surfaces that sequentially 19% of the largest greatest number of story covers principal-teacher relationship, 10.5% covers classroom management and 9.5% covers school-parent relationships.

The plots stories mostly focus on are related to issues that are better-rooted in the memory storages of school principal and teachers. Communication is so pervasive in schools that it is a fundamental and integrative process in school management. The stories are more centered upon the issues where human relations are denser. The fact that teachers are generally inside class with students may be a factor driving them to narrate greater numbers of stories concerning classroom management. In school environment following the students and other teachers, it is school principals that teachers communicate with frequently.

According to theme analysis results of stories, stories related to leadership constitute 9% of all stories. Stories on leadership reflect positive school culture. In negative school cultures, leadership stories remain at rather low levels.

In the distribution of stories with respect to their plots,

Table 2. Distribution of organizational stories with respect to their plots

Plots of stories	f	%
Principal-teacher relationship	38	19
Classroom management	21	10.5
School-parent relationship	19	9.5
Leadership	18	9
Organizational conflict	17	8.5
Authoritarian administration	16	8
Organizational justice	15	7.5
Team work	13	6.5
Social activities	12	6
Human resources	11	5.5
Unethical behaviors	9	4.5
Teacher-teacher relationship	6	3
Use of physical resources	5	2.5
Total	200	100

organizational conflict with a ratio of 8.5% and authoritative management with a ratio of 8% occupy significant places. Stories concerning organizational conflict and authoritative management reflect negative school culture. Organizational conflicts between school principal and teacher and authoritative administration style of school principal over teachers adversely influence school culture.

6.5% indicating the ratio of stories on team work is a negative result in terms of shared school culture. Establishing an effective team work amongst teachers can ensure the sharing of different organizational stories within this sphere. The stories based on team work are mostly positive stories. The smallness of the number of such stories indicates that team work has not been rooted in the organizational memory of primary education schools.

In primary education schools 4.5% of organizational stories are composed of ethical issues. It is a refreshing result that this ratio is not high. However even the slightest emergence of problems that may adversely affect ethical culture in elementary schools can disturb the school climate.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Organizational stories are one of the basic factors accounting for the culture of a school. The themes within these stories lay stress upon organizational values. These stories that also portray conflicts in human relationships and quality of communication can be helpful in interpreting school culture as well.

Most of the analyzed organizational stories reflect negative school culture. Negative school culture is identified with a culture unwilling to share; filled with serious communication problems and indifferent to respect towards differences. Hyde (2008) in his research on the mental health within organizations analyzed stories under two main criteria namely positive and negative. In negative organizational stories baddie types are attempted to clarify. Educational leaders need to increase effectiveness of a school by reinforcing a positive school culture. A school culture favoring inequality in education may have destructive outcomes over school principals and teachers (Dantley and Telman, 2006; Frattura and Copper, 2007).

Stories may be viewed as the organizational memory of schools. The experiences schools undergo can be played via stories. The lessons learnt from stories can develop problem solving skills of school principals. Stories may facilitate the participation of school personnel into organizational learning process.

It is observed that analyzed stories are more oriented to explaining informal structure of schools rather than their formal structure. Organizational stories are centered upon issues such as principal-teacher relationship, classroom management, school-parent relationship, leadership and organizational conflict. In these issues, relationship is foregrounded as the main theme. The issues stories focus on also indicate the problems that are most prevalent at schools.

The conflicts faced in organizational justice and ethical issues can be more clearly illustrated via stories. It may not always be possible to detect critical issues such as justice and ethics by analyzing written documents. In detecting crucial problems and interpreting symbolic world of school, organizational stories can be employed. Wodilla and Forray (2008) analyzed stories in terms of organizational justice. It has been found out that stories reflecting organizational justice is centered upon personal and cultural dimensions. The results obtained from their research are parallel with the results of this research.

Organizational stories alone cannot fully account for the culture of a school. Stories provide feedback. The

lessons learnt from stories can be helpful in developing school culture. In raising school principals and teachers, these stories can be made use of.

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