Full Length Research Paper

Developing activities of learning organizations in primary schools

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The research question has been stated as "what are the activities that aim to develop a learning organization in primary shcools?" The aim of this research is to figure out what types of activities have been conducted to develop a learning organization in primary schools. A descriptive scanning model research has been designed. Examination of the reports and records, review of literature and interview techniques have been used to find answers to the research question. In primary schools, the understanding of learning school and learning organization and the necessary planned actions do not exist sufficiently, but the necessary activities that are to be presented in learning schools are at a limited level. According to the results of the study, the satisfaction of students, teaching staff, parents and the environment should be taken into consideration together, and the expectations and activities for continuous learning and development should be supported.

Key words: Learning organizations, learning schools, primary schools, continuous learning, development.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional organization structure of organizations should be changed and reorganized in order to attain process and evaluate the related information. It is known that organizations should be able to use information in order to survive in a competitive world and keep up with the technological developments in the field (Elma and Demir, 2000). People learn more easily when sharing appears as a result of mutual interaction. This interaction has a synergic influence on people and leads to effective and efficient learning (Yazıcı, 2001).

All organizations have the ability to learn. However, some learn more efficiently than the others. The leading factor that affects learning is the administrators. The successful learning of an organization needs full attention and participation of the administrators. In other words, administrators are responsible for creating a context in which effective learning will take place. As a final conse-quence of an organizational learning, learners in learning organization make an effort to identify and solve a problem for the sake of developing the organization. Therefore, the bases of such type of an organization depend on identifying and solving problems and taking required precautions in order not to come across them again. For that reason, the staff needs to take the responsibility of identifying and solving the problem (Çalık, 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions of the learning organizations and learning schools

Organizations are the places where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspira-tion is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together (Senge, 1990).The concept of a learning organization originated in systems thinking and is typified by Senge's (1990) model of the five disciplines of a learning organization (Silins, Zarins and Mulford, 2002). These are mental models, shared vision, systems thinking, personal mastery and team learning**.** There is not a single accepted definition of a learning organisation. The idea of a learning organization in the context of ma-nagement theory was developed by Argyris and Schon (1978) and made popular by Senge (1990). There are many definitions of those authors who have published on learning organizations. Organizational learning occurs

through shared insights, knowledge and mental models and builds on past knowledge and experience (Stata, 1989). Many authors wrote about the importance of "vision" (Bennis and Nanus 1985; Davies and Ellison 1999; Jenkins 1991). The other most commonly mentioned elements of a learning organisation can be summarised as: horizontal profession of information flow to help bring together expertise as well as links with the external world; and, the profession to understand, analyse, and use the dynamic system within which they are functioning; coordinated group effort towards commonly shared goals; active commitment to continuous improvement and to the diffusion of best practices throughout the organization (Keating, 1995 as a cited in Silins, Zarins and Mulford, 2002). The need for organisations to survive in a changing environment has led to the development of the concept of the learning organisation. A learning organisation is an organisation that facilitates learning for all of its members, and thereby continuously transforms itself (Rowley, 1998) .

Learning organisations were defined as schools that develop shared goals, establish collaborative teaching and learning environments and recognize and reinforce good work, provide opportunities for continuing professional development, encourage initiatives and risk taking, regularly review all aspects related to and influencing the work of the school, (Silins, Zarins and Mulford, 2002). As we approach the new millennium the scope and pace of change seem to be accelerating in all areas of human existence. We have to move with it or ahead of it if we are not to be left behind. The concept of life-long learning has become a frequently used term in political and educational parlance. The basic aim of schools has to be the development of the self-directed learner by developing the students'life-long learning competences. To achieve this goal schools have to change from institutions that transfer knowledge into learning organizations (Coppieters, 2005). The challenge for schools is to adopt change strategies that provide internal stability while moving ahead. This challenge elsewhere by focusing on a change strategy where learning comes to be seen as the single and most important resource for organizational renewal in the postmodern age and may be able to be met in education (Hargreaves, 1995). Literature recognizing the advantages of reconceptualising schools as learning organizations and advocating organizational learning has begun to accumulate, however; systematic investigations of how schools might bring this about are still scarce (Silins, Zarins and Mulford, 2002).

The most important characteristics of school as learning organizations about school vision and mission and policy and resources in Leithwood et al. (1998) are as follows: School vision and mission should be clear and accessible by most staff; It should be pervasive in conversation and decision-making; It can be perceived to be meaningful by most staff; and it should be shared by

most staff. Policy and resources can be listed as follows:

1. Technical assistance to implement new practices; vailability of a professional library and professional readings circulated among staff;
2. Availability of computer facilities sufficient resources to support professional development.

We advocate a shift in thinking about the school as organization. Based on the findings of complex theory it is reasonable to state that the school, like any other social organization, is a complex dynamic system. However, organizational learning can neither be reduced to changes in structure nor simple adaptations in some isolated aspects of staff development, teaching methods, curriculum or participation structure. Transforming a school into a learning organization is a continuous learning process on its own (Coppieters, 2005).

From an examination of the literature, seven dimensions that characterize schools as learning organizations were identified and these define what is meant by organizational learning (Silins, Zarins and Mulford, 2002). These are environmental scanning, vision and goals, collaboration, taking initiatives and risks, review, ecognition and reinforcement and continuing professional development.

A learning organization means an organization where learning is a fundamental value. Such an organization is ready for success. Learning's being the fundamental value means learning's being institutionalization, while the preformances of individuals go up, the power of the institution will go up too. Özden (1999) states that according to Senge (2002) learning is a basic stimulus for individuals and he asserts the following issues regarding individual learning: With the help of learning truly people re-create themselves and, can do the things they have not done before. They reperceive the world and thus they specify their positions with the knowledge they have attained.

Problem

The motivation to learn is in the nature of everybody. People who have certain vision have necessary motivation for newer learnings (Senge, 2002). However, in a school where every step is taken according to the book and education and teaching is conducted within strict borders, newer learnings about every individual in the school should not be expected. Support and adequate time should be supplied to the teachers, students and other staff and let them use the potentials and skills which have been underestimated for years.

It has been observed that there has been effort to develop educational system both structurally and behaviourally. Concepts and applications related with quality and total quality, understanding constructivist approaches

and trying to apply them, arrangements about inhouse training and reading hours are among such activities in Turkey. Although these cannot be called "learning organization" or "learning school" activities, the observed efforts are adding up for an organizational learning. A research about how these efforts are related with the qualities of developing a learning school and to describe the level of it has become a necessary research topic. To do this, a descriptive scanning model research has been designed. The research question for this study is "what are the activities that aim to develop a learning organization in the primary shcools?"

The sub-problems of the research and the interview questions are as follows:

1. What are the meanings of learning organizations and learning schools for teachers and administrators' opinions?
2. What kinds of activities are done in primary schools about learning organization?
3. What are the main obstacles of the related learning organizations and learning schools in primary schools?

METHODOLOGY

Examining the reports and records, literature review and interview techniques are used to answer the research question. The universe of this study is state and private primary schools and the teaching staff in Gaziantap, Kayseri and Kahramanmaraş and the sample is formed out of 8 primary schools in 3 centers and 9 administrators and 24 teachers working in these schools. Interview has been done face to face and sound is recorded. According to process of meeting, some extra questions are asked to make the idea cleared. The responses obtained from the sample group were classified according to the sub-problems and then the data were composed according to the much or less shared opinions. A comparative analysis from the perspective of state and private primary schools was done throughout the data gathered by examining the files and records, literature and interview techniques which were evaluated together. Furthermore, there has been a ranking order from the most shared statements to the least shared. The findings and sugesstions of the research have also been given, after the comments and discussions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section is based on the data gathered from the answers of the questions administered to the sample group of education staff.

How teachers and administarators perceive the terms "learning organisations" and "learning schools"

The responses obtained for the first research questions can be summarised as follows.   The participants emphasized the importance of the following issues considering that schools should have the qualities of organizations within the context of learning organization.

First of all, in service acitivities should take place frequently, and organizations should have a team spirit by encouraging, enterprising and leardeship behaviours. Furthermore, people working in an educational organisation need to develop themselves and encourage the others for this effort in order to contribute to the organisation they belong to. With the help of the knowledge acquired through researches, they will higly progress both in educational and administrative profession.

Statements like these are associated with learning school. When the order of the answers given is examined, it can be observed that the following items have not be concentrated on as much as the other. The oreder is listed as   "encouraging, enterprising and leardeship behaviours; creating a strong learning culture activities like continuous learning; individuals' sharing a common vision and improving themselves and the schools; awarding differences and success;   and activities to share and develop the vision and goals of school." The data show that teachers and administrators do not organize continuous, concious and planned learning school activities but explain the concept of learning organization with their teaching experience.

When asked the meaning of the "Learning School", one of the responses given by a teacher is as follows:

"I think learning school means the reading the related scientific studies and the necessity of learning. We should constantly continue learning and improve ourselves. At that point in-service training is very important. To me, learning school means the necessity of everyone's continuing learning including teachers and administrators."

Most of the teachers define learning school similarly. One of the teachers said that:

"A teacher always should read, share his/her knowledge and skills and have a vision that can improve not only himself/herself but also the people around him/her. In learning schools, it is always being experienced the excitement for learning".

About one third of the teachers used these definitions which reflect perfectly the characteristics of learning schools. It is understood that the minority which took part in the interview read the written literature about learning organization and school, but the majority do not read about these topics or have not perceived such concepts throughout their professional knowledge and experience.

The activities conducted in primary schools concerning learning school

The answers obtained from the school administrators and teachers according to sharing degree are given in Table 1.

The results obtained in this study reveal that primary

Table 1. Learning school activities in primary schools.

Learning organisation and learning school activities.
1. Systematic teacher and group meetings
2. Educational club meetings and activities
3. Funcitonal meetings about total quality management
4. Keeping the school library open within the shifts
5. Seminars in every term
6. Encouraging students to read books
7. Celebrating individual, group success and special occasions together
8. Continuous cooperation with parents and surrounding organizations
9. Field trips according to the program
10. Club activities (sport, chess, picture, music, theatre etc)
11. Setting up a strong school vision, giving importance to team conscious and continuous learning culture
12. Encouraging enterprising and leadership behaviours
13. Science and technology activities and competitions
14. Awarding people whose differences and successes are noticed
15. Encouraging teachers' who are improving themselves
16. The activities to share and develop the vision and goals of school

schools do not have the characteristics of a learning organisation but to some extent it can be said that it is possible to face some activities related to learning school. Table 1 shows some of the acitvities that they conducted.

In primarily schools, there are activities associated with learning school. The activities are mostly annual course plans, course trip and examining plans, teachers and other staff's developing themselves, keeping the school library open within the shifts, celebrating individual, group success and special occasions together, teacher and group meetings, social, cultural and sportive club activities, total quality activities, using school library and reading activities, seminars before terms, school and class parents meetings, necessary field trips, cooperation between teachers and creating a team spirit and continuous learning culture, supportive course, elective courses and study hours.

The following activities are seldomly observed in the primary schools. These activities are**:** supporting enterprising individuals, encouraging teacher-parent-student participation, cooperation with surrounding organizations, creating school vision, encouraging team spirit, continuous learning culture, encouraging enterprising and leadership behaviors, the activities aiming to share and develop the vision and goals of school, awarding differences and success and a limited amount of science-technology activies.

In this respect, one of the teachers states as follows:

"In our school, whoever you ask, he/she mentions the importance of reading and self-improvement. However most of us do not behave just like the way we say. We do not care about concepts, processes, and learning *practices such as new teaching methods, learning organization, leadership, efficient administration in our free time."*

It is clear that many of the teachers have such confessions. However, a principal says:

"In our school, obeying the regulations of education and teaching facilities are being carried out regularly. Teachers who are willing to improve themselves can use library and internet. On the other hand the motivation to learn will probably increase on the condition that the economic supports are increased. Therefore the number of learning school activities will certainly increase."

Many people agree with this answer and it is also highly important for it points out "economic motivators". Education employees expect financial and spiritual motivators. Learning school directly means the activities on sharing and improving the vision and the goals of school and encouraging the enterprising and leadership behaviors are being rarely carried out

Obstacles for developing learning organization and learning school

It is possible to come ocross verbal statetements about necessities of learnning school in every educational organization. There is a potential to make it real in primary schools. However, obstacles regarding the school-culture, insufficiency of time, formal tasks and responsibilities of teachers, training process and set habits of

teaching staff. They are considered as the expected behaviors such as enterprising, leadership, continuos learning, sharing vision and accuring learning school.

A female teacher defined the obstacles of being a learning school saying:

"I started my career with a great excitement. Apart from my teaching duties I also help for administrative work. In the previous school I worked, my colleagues and I developed reading and learning projects. The school principals and parents supported us. However, I have lost my excitement in my current school because our culture lacks desire for constant learning and improvement. The people around me do not support teachers like me. We only give courses."

It is inferred that learning culture and awareness and practices of continuous improvements change from school to school. Another female teacher confessed:

"The practices on learning school will certainly be carried out on the condition that the principal has leadership characteristics, supports us, creates learning and improving culture, is not mistaken seeing evaluation as just doing testing and guides us properly."

Many teachers agree with this issue. The function of principal, the importance of school environment and learning culture and the inadequacy of examination-centered education is concluded.

Time, source, supportive school culture context and lack of support from the administration, insufficiency in the practising of the activities and acquisitions, decrease in love of profession and enthusiasm, crowded class-rooms, red tape, inadequacy in teaching technologies etc., can be regarded as the obstacles that prevent primary schools from becoming learning schools. Another basic obstacle is the testing and evaluation system in education which forces stutdents to get highest grade in the standartized exams with multiple choice tests rather than raising thinking, productive skills. Due to the raising context and style, commitment to the regulations instead of using initiative and deficiencies about cooperative working were also pointed out. Moreover, teaching staff's lack of motivation, absence of economical incentives, inadequate salary and test-centered education system were also stated as obstacles. A teacher stated:

"As teachers and principals, we do not hold meetings based on education problems and discussions of them or we just hold inefficient ones. In our undergraduate programs we were not aware of the learning school, teacher leadership, teamwork and its importance or we did not study on them efficiently. In my institution, apart from formal education, time is not given for different activities and projects. We primarily prefer individual works."

Considering the rest of the teachers' thoughts, it is clearly seen that most of the teachers share the same ideas. All these interviews point out the inadequacy of the programs in faculties of education, inadequacy of applied education, lack of time in schools, as obstacles inadequacy of learning and teamwork culture. Nevertheless, there are some improvements in primary schools and teacher programs. Therefore it can be said that the characteristics of learning school in these schools can be more adequate in the future.

Conclusion

Most of the primary schools, do not adequately have activities that promote understanding of learning school and learning organization. The existing ones do not fit the requirements of a learning school. Those that can be included in the learning school activities are as follows: systematic teacher and group meetings; keeping the school library open within the shifts; continuous cooperation with parents and surrounding organizations; teachers' developing themselves. Social club activities, meeting about total quality, pre-term seminars, school and class parent meetings, necessary field trips, cooperation among teachers and creating a spirit of team and a continuous learning culture activities are the other activities. Furthermore, in some of the state primary schools it can sometimes be possible to confront the learning activities of awarding differences and success, sharing and developing the vision and goals of school, supporting enterprising individuals. The following activities also take place in these schools: encouraging active teacher, parent and student participation, cooperation with surrounding organizations, encouraging enterprising and leardership behaviors and science-technology and club.

The other problems that can be listed are deficiencies about time, source, supportive school culture context and lack of support from the administration, insufficiency in the practising of the activities and acquisitions. Decrease in love of profession and enthusiasm, crowded class-rooms, red tape, inadequacy in teaching technologies are basic obstacles in primary schools to develop learning schools are the other shortcomings that prevent school from being learning schools.

According to the results of the study, the satisfaction of students, teaching staff, parents and the environment should be taken into consideration together and the expectations and activities for continuous learning and development should be supported. In this study, the proposals of teachers and administrators to attain the necessary conscious and skills about school culture and vision have been presented. Moreover, the activities to share and develop the vision and goals of school, creating continuous learning, the sharing and cooperation, sensitivity to the environment and improving team conscious, awarding differences and success have been

enhanced.

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