

*Full Length Research Paper*

# An investigation of ethical culture in educational organizations

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The main objective of the research is to analyse the opinions of teachers in state high schools about organizational ethics in terms of various variables and to develop suggestions in the light of findings. The study has a descriptive quality in evaluating the teachers' opinions and uses the likert type scale developed by researchers so as to determine the opinions of the participants. The population of the study is composed of teachers working at government high schools in the city of Kütahya, a province located in the western part of Turkey. At the end of this research, it was determined that; the opinions of teachers regarding the organizational ethics vary significantly according to years of experience, gender and branch by the participants. In addition, female teachers think more positively than male ones about the ethical culture at school. On the other hand, while teachers with high seniority think more negatively about the ethical culture at school, other teachers were more indecisive about the matter. Collectively, science teachers, compared to teachers of social sciences, consider their schools more reputable in terms of ethics.

**Key words:** Organizational ethics, principal, school, ethical culture, teacher.

## INTRODUCTION

An ethical life is a requirement of existence for every individual. All the religions, philosophical disciplines and even political ideologies argue for thinking and living in line with the right principles of good deed. In this respect, in every aspect of their lives, people should behave in such a personality that is shaped with these principles. As such, those without such a characteristic that is shaped by ethic values (McCurdy, 1998). Ethics is a discipline of philosophy, and it is defined as moral action science (Pieper, 1999; Lennick and Kiel, 2005; Frankena, 2007). For the creation of ethical climate in organization leaders must demonstrate ethical behavior, and must be a good example for members in terms of ethics. Besides ethical behaviors of leaders are important determinant in the formation of ethical climate (Aronson, 2001; Dickson, Smith, Grojean and Ehrhart, 2001).

The reputation of an organisation might be damaged as a result of unethical behaviours. Therefore, it is crucial to abstain from unethical behaviours in both professional

and private life. Ethics is about the moral codes and values effective on determining what is the right or the wrong behaviour or attitude. Ethics, in a sense, also denotes the formation of a difference between desired values and behaviours of organizational culture (stereotyped values and behaviours) and those that the organization has to present out (Schultz and Werner, 2005).

In order for ethical codes in the organizations to be internalized by its members or to be turned into behaviours, they should be integrated with social values. If the ethical culture of organizations overlap with the ethical values of the society, it will be easier for organizational ethics to be institutionalized. Ethics is such a concept that not only includes the right but also the wrong and immoral applications in social life. In this respect, this concept can be defined as a value system that guides the behaviours of the individuals in and out of the organization.

## Ethics and organizations

Ethics has great importance in today's organizations. Some of the issues publics are so sensitive to are orga-

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nizational corruption, bribery, abuse of authority and fraud. Organizational ethics can be defined as cited by as follows: Ethical organizations continually interact with their environment and are just to everybody. As a rule, they observe others' interests as well as their own. Responsibility in ethical organizations is individual rather than collective; that is, consciousness of organizational responsibility arises from every individual's consciousness of responsibility. In this context, some of the ethical values are loyalty, honesty, justice, respect, tolerance, responsibility and courage (Yildirim, 2001; Moorhouse, 2002; Karakose, 2007).

Some ethical problems might be experienced in organizations. For example, employees might lie, exploit or abuse their position, harass others, and be involved in sexual harassment (Yildirim, 2001; Pehlivan-Aydin, 2002). A great number of executives resort to lying, falsifying or secrecy rather than a loss of promotion or bonus (Nakra, 2001). Organizations cannot maintain their existence for a long time without sustaining their ethical behaviours. Unethical deeds not only lead to unrest in the society but also destroy the prestige of the organization. The shortest way to avoid from ethical problems in today's competitive market conditions is to be such an organization that always keeps to the right way. Since ethical culture leads the behaviours of the employees and guides the organizational targets, ethical values should be institutionalized within the structure.

If an executive doesn't possess honesty, he/she can never be a role model; without honesty, employees cannot be motivated. If executives are in the habit of lying, he cannot make others believe them, thus losing their confidence (Fleet, 1999). In order for leaders to be successful, leaders should be mature ethically and also be in search for ways to raise others' ethical maturity. A leader devoid of ethical maturity has to face the failures of the organization (Duffield and McCuen, 2000).

## **Educational organizations and ethics**

It is expected from educational executives to observe the professional ethics as well as laws and regulations. Therefore, ethical values and principles form a solid base in shaping the behaviours of executives because ethical understanding of affects organizational decisions and actions (Taymaz, 2003). School leadership, based on ethical regulations through democratic values, should be such an approach that puts the emphasis on ethical values and aims to raise the success level of students. From this perspective, leadership requires making use of ethical and critical applications while transforming the undesired characteristics in school culture including discrimination of race, class, gender, religion or local diversity (Aytac, 2000; Grace, 2000).

In terms of educational organizations, ethics can be considered as a system of values that defines the ethical

behaviours to be complied with at school. In educational organizations, education should be in line with universal ethical values; everybody should be treated equally without any discrimination of race, language, religion or gender. It is ethically important that individual rights be observed, such an environment be provided in which every member can express his/her opinions freely, and evaluation and assessment be conducted objectively.

School organization, as an ethical organization, has to develop new ethical codes compatible with the needs of the age; otherwise, a school, not having achieved the ethical change, comes up against serious dilemmas and conflicts in terms of ethical codes. Institutionalization of organizational ethics is a crucial matter at schools, which can be accomplished primarily through effective ethical leadership of school administrators. It is a challenge to do away with ethical contamination at schools. Diverging from ethical codes leads to deterioration in work ethics and organizational climate. Every school forms its own system of ethical values compatible with its own culture. However, only when ethical values are institutionalized organizationally rather than individually, do they become meaningful for school culture. Otherwise, ethical values that haven't been integrated into school culture can by no means survive or add richness to the organizational life of school (Celik, 2005; Kocabas and Karakose, 2009). In educational organizations, a plan should be developed for internal and external partner groups to explain ethical codes and unethical behaviours and it is a necessary strategy that this plan be shared with all social partners. It is not adequate at school to express ethical behaviours only orally or written, because the school administrators and teachers should be consistent in their actions as well towards students so that ethical behaviours can be internalized by the whole group.

When the literature on organizational ethics is analysed, it is seen that there are certain national and international studies on the matter (Johnson, 2000; Pehlivan-Aydin, 2002; Nolan, 1993; Grace, 2000). In these studies, it is stated that ethical organizations will gain respect in the society and that there is a close relation between the leadership behaviour of school administrators and ethical culture of the organization and also between ethical applications of administrators and ethical climate of the school. Besides, it is also emphasized that educational leadership is closely related with such ethical values as honesty and respect.

Every school has its own ethical values. The staff and the students develop their behaviours on the strength of these principles. It is hardly possible for a school organization to survive without ethical norms and values. If ethical values are ignored or the members aren't guided to organizational ethics in the right manner, the school's respect in the society will be damaged and it will be harder to reach for the ultimate aims. It will contribute to institutionalization of organizational ethics if values and norms that will develop ethical culture at schools are de-

defined clearly and are internalized by everyone; in other words, if ethical values and norms are adopted by the whole staff and thus are turned into behaviours.

Studies on organizational ethics (Johnson, 2000; Grace, 2000; Lashway, 1996) reveal that such ethical organizations that conduct the right manner will achieve organizational success more easily by raising their respectability in the eyes of both their staff and their customers. In educational organizations, it is ethically crucial to be sincere, consistent and decisive in promises. Therefore, the administrators should be a good role model with their attitudes and behaviours because staff follows role models while shaping their opinions about what is right or wrong. In other words, organizational ethics will guide the behaviours of staff at school, which means that the administrators should abstain from unethical behaviours and reflect organizational ethics in their behaviours. In this context, it is hoped that determining the opinions of staff about organizational ethics, ethical codes and unethical behaviours at schools will contribute to doing away with the problems arising from unethical behaviours. In the respect, the problem of the research is to determine whether there is a significant difference in the opinions of teachers about organizational ethics at schools. All in all, the object of the research can be defined as follows:

The main objective of the research is to analyse the opinions of teachers in state high schools about organizational ethics in terms of various variables and to develop suggestions in the light of findings. For this purpose, answers were sought for the following questions:

Q1: What are the opinions of teachers in state high schools about organizational ethics?

Q2: Do these opinions differentiate in terms of gender?

Q3: Do these opinions differentiate in terms of seniority?

Q4: Do these opinions differentiate in terms of branch?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research is a survey model because it aims to describe the current state as it is (Karasar, 1999; Balci, 1997). In the study, the likert type scale developed by researchers was used to determine the opinions of the teachers working at government high schools about organizational ethics in terms of certain variables and it was aimed to reveal whether there was a difference among these opinions. The likert type scale was graded as "totally agree" = 5, "agree" = 4, "no idea" = 3, "disagree" = 2, "totally disagree" = 1. The following criteria have been used. When the mean value is calculated equal to  $p < 0.05$  or higher, the attitude is accepted significant; when the mean value is calculated lower than  $p < 0.05$ , the attitude is accepted meaningless. The population of the study is composed of about 850 teachers working at the high schools in the city of Kütahya. The sample is, on the other hand, composed of total 406 teachers chosen randomly from the population. The research was conducted in 2007 - 2008 academic period in the city of Kütahya. In order to determine the difference between the opinions of the subjects, literature review was done and a likert type scale composed of 18 articles was used. The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient of the scale was found Alpha = 0.87 and this

was found to be sufficient for reliability. According to Ozdamar (1997), if Cronbach's alpha ranged from a low of 0.80 to a high of 1.00 questionnaires were pretty reliable, so the reliability of the test prepared was considered to be sufficient. Expert opinions were sought for content validity analysis. The data from the questionnaires were analysed through "SPSS 10.0" program and the following statistical procedures were followed: in order to determine whether there was a meaningful difference between the opinions of teachers, t-test was conducted in dual groups. Also, in groups composed of more than two, One-Way Variance Analysis (ANOVA) was carried out and as a result of ANOVA test, when a difference was found among the groups, Tukey's-b test was used to determine which groups showed discrepancy.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In this section, findings about the independent variables and teachers' opinions about organizational ethics were analysed in terms of various variables depending on the sub-problems of the research and were shown as tables. Not all the articles in the scale were evaluated but only those which showed meaningful difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) in the opinions of teachers were.

Demographical information of the teachers who participated in the research is given in Table 1. Findings about the independent variables showed that 28.08% of the subjects were female, while 71.93% were male; 17.73% had a seniority of 0 - 10 years; 52.46% of 11 - 20 years and 29.81% of over 21 years. In terms of teachers' dispersion according to branches, the majority was the teachers of social sciences with 66.50%, while those of science with 33.50%.

Table 2 presents the t-test results of teachers' opinions about organizational ethics according to gender variable. Comparing the opinions of the subjects about the expression "The staff at my school can put forward their suggestions and opinions freely without a fear of criticism or punishment" through t-test, a statistically meaningful difference ( $t = 2.756$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ) was found among the groups. While the male teachers have an indecisive attitude towards this opinion ( $M = 2.91$ ); female teachers showed participation ( $M = 3.81$ ). In other words, females had more positive thoughts about the fact that the staff at my school can put forward their suggestions and opinions freely. In the researches made by Pehlivan (1999) and Cakir (1999) on ethical behaviors of education administrators and it was found that the school principals were generally tolerant against the employees. Brown, Treviño and Harrison (2005) have expressed that leaders should take into account the ethical values when they decided on a topic.

Comparing the opinions of the subjects about the expression "Promises given to the members of the school (teachers, students, parents) are mostly kept" through t-test, a meaningful difference was determined between the two groups ( $t = 2.479$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ). While the female teachers agreed with this opinion ( $M = 3.71$ ), male teachers stated that they were indecisive ( $M = 2.76$ ). In other words, while the female teachers stated that promises

**Table 1.** Demographical information of the participants.

Independent variables	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	292	71.92
Female	114	28.08
<b>Branch</b>		
Social sciences	270	66.50
Sciences	136	33.50
<b>Seniority</b>		
0-10 years	72	17.73
11-20 years	213	52.46
21 years or more	121	29.81
Total	406	100.00

**Table 2.** Summary of t-test for the variable gender as relates to teachers' opinions.

Survey Items	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	p
10. The staff at my school can put forward their suggestions and opinions freely without a fear of criticism or punishment	Male	292	2.91	1.40	2.756	0.006*
	Female	114	3.81	1.10		
3. Promises given to the members of the school (teachers, students, parents ..) are mostly kept	Male	292	2.76	1.43	2.479	0.013*
	Female	114	3.71	1.35		

Note: \* Significant at  $p < 0.05$ , SD = Standard Deviation,  $p$  = significance level.

**Table 3.** Summary of the one-way ANOVAs for the variable of seniority as relates to teachers' opinions.

Survey Item	Seniority	N	Mean	SD	F	p
12. Individual rights of the members of the organization are observed	0 - 10 years	72	4.11	0.735	3.696	0.001*
	10 - 20 years	213	3.81	0.523		
	21 years or more	121	2.93	0.620		

Note: \*Significant at  $p < 0.05$ , SD = Standard Deviation,  $p$  = significance level.

ate school were mostly kept, male teachers didn't share the same opinion. On the whole, it is understood that females approach to this opinions about the organizational ethics of the school more positively than male teachers. In other words, female teachers consider their schools more respectable ethically than male teachers. In a research made by Altinkurt (2007), it was found that the school administrators were not keeps their words against employees (Table 3).

According to the variable of seniority, the results of Anova test about the opinions of teachers about organizational ethics are shown in Table 3. Comparing the opinions of the subjects about the expression "Individual rights of the members of the organization are observed" through Anova Test, a meaningful difference was found ( $F = 3.696$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). As a result of Tukey's-b test, it was decided that the difference resulted from the fact that the score of those with seniority over 20 years was lower

than that of those with seniority between 0 - 10 years. Whereas this opinion was adopted by teachers with seniority between 10 - 20 years ( $M = 3.81$ ) and those with seniority between 0 - 10 years ( $M = 4.11$ ) as "agree", those with seniority over 20 years ( $M = 2.93$ ) were indecisive. As understood from these data, the reflection of "respect to individual rights" as one of the most important values of organizational ethics on school culture is perceived by teachers differently. Compared to others, teachers with seniority over 20 years think more negatively about showing respect to individual rights. Zhu, May and Avolio (2004) expressed that ethical leaders take into account individual needs of employee, and advocate employee rights, at the same time they behave in a fair manner (Table 4).

Again in Table 4, according to the variable of branch, the results of t-test on the opinions of teachers about organizational can be seen. Comparing the opinions of the

**Table 4.** Summary of t-test for the variable of branch as relates to teachers' opinions.

Survey Items	Branch	N	Mean	SD	t	p
1. I think evaluation and scoring is fair at my school	Social Sciences	270	3.66	1.27	2.138	0.033*
	Sciences	136	2.78	1.44		
8. The staff form a role model with their attitudes and behaviours	Social Sciences	270	3.59	1.43	2.652	0.002*
	Sciences	136	2.95	1.58		

Note: \* Significant at  $p < 0.05$ , SD = Standard Deviation, p = significance level.

subjects about the expression "Evaluation and scoring is fair at my school", a statistically meaningful difference was found ( $t = 2.138$ ,  $p = 0.033$ ). Teachers of social sciences agreed with this opinion ( $M = 3.66$ ) while science teachers expressed their indecisiveness ( $M = 2.78$ ). These data determined that "the principle of justice and equality" was regarded with low level of importance at schools in the research. Yilmaz and Tasdan (2009) have emphasized the concept of justice between the ethical behaviors of educational administrators in the research named 'organizational citizenship and organizational justice in Turkish primary schools'. Gules and Ardahan (1998) found that school administrators did not behave in a fair manner against employee. Howell and Avolio (1992) expressed that decisions are observed by employees in schools, and these decisions are the model for them. In terms of internal and external reputation of the school, it is important and necessary that one be unbiased while determining the performance of the staff and the students.

Comparing the opinions of the subjects about the expression "The staff form a role model with their attitudes and behaviours" through t-test, a statistically meaningful difference was found ( $t = 2.652$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). As seen in Table 4, Teachers of social sciences agreed with this opinion ( $M = 3.59$ ) while science teachers expressed their indecisiveness ( $M = 2.95$ ). Negative opinions of some teachers about being a good role model for the society are a challenging matter for the reputation of the school. Leader must be a role model for employees (Brown, Treviño and Harrison, 2005). Since a school is an organization to serve the society, the society should have high opinions about the organization; otherwise, it won't be competitive enough to attract students and parents. In this context, it won't be wrong to argue that achieving its objectives is proportional to the reputation and respectability of both the organization and its staff in the society.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to gender variable, there is a meaningful difference among the opinions of teachers about organizational ethics. In other words, female teachers think more positively than male ones about the ethical culture at school. The provision of justice at school makes a contribution to the formation of a healthy organization culture

(Schroeder, 2002; Mizuo, 1998). In this sense, the basic role of school administrators as leaders is to show rights and wrongs from a moral perspective and to help employees at all (Burns, 1978).

According to the variable of seniority, there is also a meaningful difference among the opinions of teachers about organizational ethics. Accordingly, while teachers with high seniority think more negatively about the ethical culture at school, other teachers were more indecisive about the matter. Ethical leaders draw attention to the ethical rules (Brown, Treviño and Harrison, 2005) besides, they reward appropriate behavior in terms of ethics and inappropriate behaviors are punished by them (Gini, 1999; Treviño, Brown and Hartman, 2003).

According to the variable of branch, there is also a meaningful difference among the opinions of teachers about organizational ethics. Collectively, science teachers, compared to teachers of social sciences, consider their schools more reputable in terms of ethics. Ethical leaders are good models for employees behaving in ethical issues, and they support development of them (May, Chan, Hodges and Avolio, 2003).

In terms of private and state organizations, in order to survive, a strong brand reputation should be sustained. When the school has a good reputation in terms of ethics, the society will regard the organization highly. Therefore, both private and state schools should strive for strengthening their reputation and enlarging their customer range. Ethical leaders must encourage the development of ethical behaviors, and they must create a positive culture of an organization (Butcher, 1997). Ethical values and norms to be observed at school should be defined clearly and shared with the staff and the students. In case of ethical problems at school, their root should be determined first and then those which might pose threat to organizational ethics should be eliminated.

If the staff adopt and demonstrate ethical behaviours, this will contribute to students' ethical maturity. Therefore, administrators and teachers should try to internalize ethical codes and show ethical behaviours sincerely. Resick, Hanges, Dickson and Mitchelson (2006) explained that ethical leadership comprised of dimensions such as collective motivation, accuracy, altruism, and incentives. Forming an ethical culture in educational organizations is possible primarily through ethical behaviours of school staff. When administrators and teachers at a school internalize universal ethical values and reflect

them in their behaviours that school will be regarded highly by its social partners.

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## Appendix

### THE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Gender:

a. ( ) Female b. ( ) Male

2. Branch:

a. ( ) Social Sciences b. ( ) Sciences

3. Seniority:

a. ( ) 0-10 years b. ( ) 11-20 years c. ( ) 21 years and more

Number	Survey items	5	4	3	2	1
1	I think evaluation and scoring is fair at my school	5	4	3	2	1
2	I think the facilities of the school are provided to everyone fairly	5	4	3	2	1
3	Promises given to the members of the school (teachers, students, parents ..) are mostly kept	5	4	3	2	1
4	There is no corruption among the staff of the school	5	4	3	2	1
5	Punishment and rewarding are conducted for everyone fairly and in justice	5	4	3	2	1
6	Giving high priority to ethical values at school applications raises organizational reputation	5	4	3	2	1
7	The staff abstain from rude remarks and behaviours so as not to upset anyone	5	4	3	2	1
8	The staff form a role model with their attitudes and behaviours	5	4	3	2	1
9	Cooperation and good relations with the members of the school (teachers, students, parents ..) are sustained at my school	5	4	3	2	1
10	The staff at my school can put forward their suggestions and opinions freely without a fear of criticism or punishment	5	4	3	2	1
11	Certain facilities are provided for the staff for free (day nursery, transportation, excursions, etc)	5	4	3	2	1
12	Individual rights of the members of the organization are observed	5	4	3	2	1
13	Solutions are sought for the private problems of the staff at school	5	4	3	2	1
14	Students and parents are always informed about techniques for efficient studying	5	4	3	2	1
15	At my school, studies are carried out to save the environment (sensitivity to the environment)	5	4	3	2	1
16	I think students at this school are raised best to be a good person, a good citizen and to have a good occupation	5	4	3	2	1
17	At my school, dangers to human life and health are determined and necessary precautions are taken (occupational accidents, natural disasters, communicable diseases).	5	4	3	2	1
18	My school has a good reputation.	5	4	3	2	1

Totally Agree: 5, Agree: 4, No Idea: 3, Disagree: 2, Totally Disagree: 1.