# Determining School Administrators' Perceptions on Institutional Culture: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

Schools, the where educational activities are carried out, are among the major institutions society considers as important. Schools undertake strategic responsibilities in maintaining cultural values and conveying them to future generations. The primary responsibility in achieving these missions is assigned to the school administrators. The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions of school administrators on institutional culture. This is a qualitative study conducted on school administrators who were selected based on the volunteering principle. Perceptions of school administrators concerning their institutions' culture and the differences between their institutional culture and other institution's cultures were determined and analyzed. Findings of this study suggest that school administrators have both positive and negative opinions regarding their institutional culture and cultural difference. While love-respect, collaboration-solidarity and common history were prominent positive opinions; lack of communication, lack of shared values and low expectation were prominent negative opinions. In addition, participants stated the environment as a crucial factor when defining culture.

**Keywords:** school, culture, institutional culture, school administrator, cultural perception.

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## Introduction

Organizations have different characteristics based on the area of service and their goals. These differences bring about unique cultural features such as values, beliefs, traditions, customs, and habits. The informal organizational structure is inevitably effective in the organizations completing their formal functions. The shared values and beliefs workers generate within the formal organizational structure, the high expectation in achieving the shared goal, the way of communication, and the norms they create brings about the need to consider the organization with a cultural viewpoint (Kilmann, Saxton, & Serpa, 1986; Tierney, 1988; Terzi, 2000; Glisson & James, 2002). With this respect, organizational culture has become a subject in primary concern for studies in the field of education and management. The reason for this is because the organization's cultural dimension remains in the center of organizational operations and directly affects workers' behaviors (Hofstede, 1998; Alvesson, 2012). If an institution's organizational culture is effective, than bureaucratic operations will be required less, and planning and decision-making processes will be facilitated. Standardizing the practices and processes within an organization will promote a convenient working environment and increase organizational productivity (Sezgin, 2010). With this respect, Sisman (2007), considering it as an individual and social phenomenon, developed various definitions for culture:

- The social heritage the individual gains from the group / society;
- The individual's way of thinking, feeling and believing;
- A society's way of living;
- The way of solving problems, the pattern of learned behaviors;
- The normative system for organizing behaviors;
- Everything that humans create as a response to what exists in nature;
- A tool for sovereignty and legitimacy.

It is evident in these definitions that there are no single definitions recognized for the concept of culture. Similarly, there are no single and clear definitions for organizational culture either. According to the literature, researchers have recognized the common features of the structure of organizational culture. These are; integrality, historic, anthropological, social structure, uncertainty, and difficult change (Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990). Schein (2010) states that there are elements such as group norms, adopted values, philosophy, climate, organizational culture, secret talents, shared meanings, rituals and ceremonies that organizational culture should embody. According to Cooke and Rousseau (1988), these elements will be evident in the attitudes of the workers. With the meaning organizational culture gained throughout time, it became efficient enough to define the assumptions, values, beliefs, norms, perceptions of the members of the organization. Together with all these features, it became the "rule of the game" (Celikten, 2003).

Studies on organizational culture indicate that; organizational culture consists of various abstract factors which complement each other. Culture has crucial functions which shape human behavior and determine organizational performance. Culture, guides people, increases shared values by strengthening interpersonal ties, and connects workers to the organization and the organization to the society. Culture is a factor which, through the means of norms, values and beliefs, affects how workers will operate, how problems should

be approached, what needs to be done while making decisions, the relationships with colleagues (Erickson, 1987; Hargreaves, 1995; Stoll, 1998; Celikten, 2003).

Organizational culture emerges with an effective leadership and strengthens with accumulating knowledge of the workers (Rashid, Sambasivan, & Johari, 2003). Organizational culture exists within every organization and is shaped by many parameters such as internal dynamics, workers' viewpoints of the organization and administrative practices. The first among these is behaviors of the leader. It has been evident in various studies that there exists a relationship between leader behaviors and organizational culture (Chen, 2004; Tsai, 2011). In education institutions, school culture was defined as the set of values and meanings that direct administrators and teachers behaviors (Barth, 2002; Celik, 2002). Thus, school culture should be a democratic structure in which every individual undertakes an equal, active, and just role (Kabasakal-Atalay et al., 2015). School culture has a framework which embodies non-written rules and assumptions, traditions, symbols and even the special language spoken by the school personnel and students (Peterson & Deal, 2011). School culture provides a standard for individual behaviors and, with time, a unique identity for the school. School culture can change based on the expectations of students and the workers, which indicates that school culture is not a static structure (Hinde, 2004).

The cultural structure of schools is influenced by administrators, teachers and student interactions, rather than by physical means. The academic significance of the school, teachers' effectiveness in class, rewarding and punishment, learning conditions of students, student responsibilities and participation, quality of teaching, and the working environment are some of the basic factors determining the cultural structure of schools (Pawlas, 1997; Celep, 2002; Ekinci, 2012; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Unlike other organizations, schools' inputs and outputs are human. This enables the placement of human resources, one of the crucial elements of school culture, in the center of the organization. Training people through qualified education is based partly on receiving education within an effective school culture (Arslan, Kuru, & Satici, 2005).

School culture affects many school dimensions, ranging from teacher performance to the state of relationships within the school. In addition, it is a factor in determining the effectiveness of educational processes (Barnett & McCormick, 2004; Balkar, 2015). Schools are among the organizations that societies require and culture is thus an important element that schools have to embody. School administrators have a significant influence in the emergence and sustainability of culture (Peterson & Deal, 1998; Habegger, 2008; Engels, Hotton, Devos, Bouckenooghe, & Aelterman, 2008; Bipath, 2012). School administrators should respond to the expectations of the school and society when developing school culture, and should analyze the answers to "what kind of a culture?" together with the other members of the organization (Ozturk & Maral, 2015).

According to Peterson and Deal (1998), when developing a strong school culture, school administrators spread the primary values of the school with their actions and words, award students others who serve the school, observe the school's traditions and customs to support its spirit, become aware of the school's heroes and their projects, thank everyone who contributes to the school, and focus on the students by continuously repeating the successes. With this respect, school administrators undertake a role as a locomotive in developing a positive school culture. Characteristics and behaviors of leaders directly affect school culture and school climate (Hollins, 1996; Karakose, 2008). The responsibility of

determining and shaping the culture within a school is assigned to school administrators (Turkmenoglu & Bulbul, 2015). With this responsibility, administrators and leaders actively participate in examining culture, organizational culture and more specifically, school culture. The purpose of this study is to determine school administrators' perceptions on institutional culture, and to develop suggestions for creating a strong institutional culture within schools.

## Methodology

Qualitative research method was used in the study as the research model. Peoples' behavior in their natural setting and descriptions about their own lives in their own words are focused on in qualitative studies (Crozby & Bates, 2011). In addition to deeply analyzing a social problem, the researcher tackles the questions "what" and "how", along with "why" in qualitative studies (Creswell, 1998). In content analyses, the frequency and variety of a message and the number of repetitions of a word pattern or word group is focused upon (Merriam, 2013).

The study group consisted of 56 school administrators who were selected based on the volunteering principle. Small groups are commonly used in qualitative studies. The reason for this is to evaluate and analyze the data more deeply (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). A literature review was carried out and an appropriate form was developed before preparing the data collection instrument. The form took its final shape after a consultation with experts in the field of management (n=4). After giving the necessary explanations, the interview forms were distributed to participants and were collected a few hours later. It is crucial for the study's reliability to treat each participants equally, and to collect as much and as accurate data as possible through application of the data collection instrument (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In the study, the following questions were asked of the participants;

- How do you define your own institution's culture? Explain.
- What is the difference between your institution's culture and another institution's culture? Explain with reasons.
- Explain the factors that define and determine institutional culture.

The interview forms collected from the participants were analyzed and transcribed into electronic data. These data were used as the primary data resource for the study.

Participant opinions for each question were examined one-by-one, and irrelevant or insufficient statements were marked as invalid. Valid data were coded in code lists as "A1, A2, A3,…A56" and these opinions were placed under the categories. Because participant opinions concerning the interview questions were placed under more than one theme, the numbers of accepted opinions were higher than the number of participants. Findings were transformed after linking the opinions together. Several concepts, which were identified based on the findings of the analyses, were modeled so as to reflect the relationships in between. Outstanding participant opinions are presented in their original forms.

The categories and interview data were examined by field experts, necessary arrangements were carried out on subjects with "consensus" and "divergence". The "Percentage of Agreement (P) = Consensus / (Consensus + Divergence) x 100" formula, as developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), was used to confirm reliability of the data obtained from the content analysis. Reliability values calculated above 70% (Miles &

Huberman, 1994) are accepted as being reliable for qualitative studies. Reliability of the study was found to be 87%, and therefore the study was recognized as being reliable.

### Findings

Findings of the study were categorized based on the opinions of school administrators. Although the majority of participant opinions concerning their institution's culture were positive, there were also some negative opinions. The thematic structure of categorized participant opinions is displayed in Figure 1.
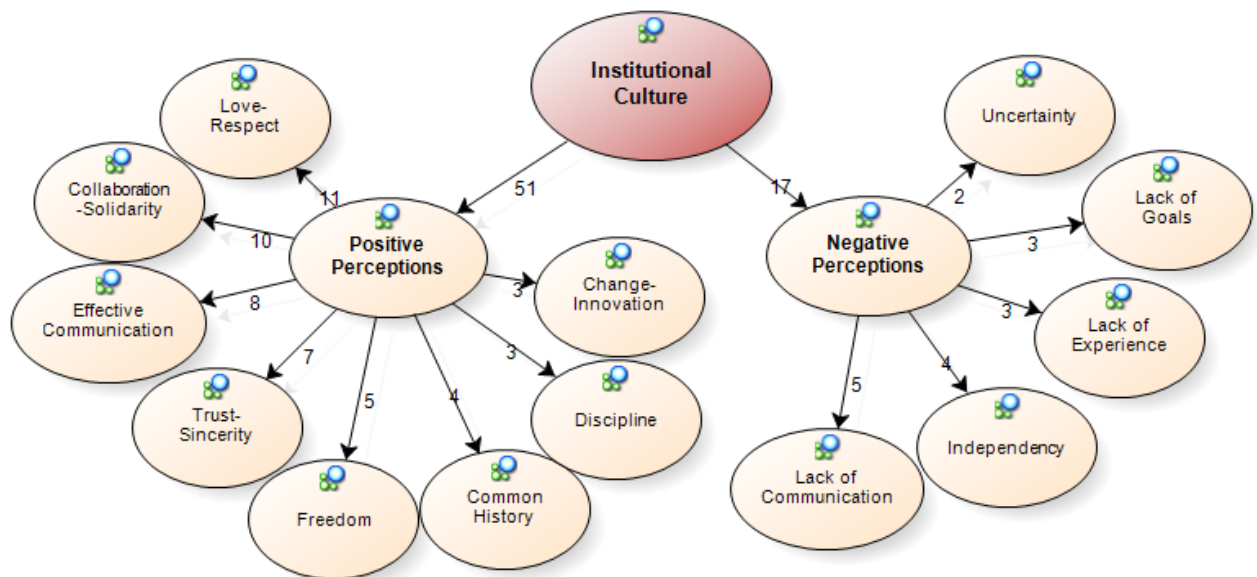


**Figure 1.** School administrators' perceptions on institutional culture

According to Figure 1, school administrators stated a total of 68 opinions, of which 51 were positive and 17 negative, about their institution's cultural definition. Because some participants stated more than one opinion, the number of opinions was higher than the number of participants. When the positive opinions are considered, shareholders showing love and respect towards each other was stated most frequently. These opinions were placed under the theme "*Love-Respect*". Ten school administrators emphasized that collaboration and solidarity was present in their culture. Opinions about intra- and extramural shareholders were placed under the theme *"Effective Communication".* Showing respect and the will to enter into sincere relationships, which are among the general needs of people who live together, were stated by the school administrators and placed under the theme *"Trust-Sincerity".* Administrators stated that the workers, students and other shareholders of the institution can express their opinions freely. These opinions were placed under the theme "*Freedom*". Administrators also stated that workers of their institution should have common experiences from the past and should be open to change and innovation. These opinions were placed under the themes "*Common History*" and "*Change-Innovation"* respectively. School administrators stated discipline in only three opinions. They stated that a certain level of perception on discipline affects institutional culture.

Administrator opinions about the cultural definition of their institution are given below together with the theme under which they were placed:

A7: *"Workers respect each other because there is an effective decentralization. But respecting others is itself not enough. The love that workers feel towards their profession helps them love each other as well."* (Love-Respect).

A35: *"What I attach most importance to at school is communication. What tires us is a lack of communication. There are people who love, care about each other, who consult each other about many problems and have strong communication skills. These come to my mind when I think about the school I work in."* (Effective Communication).

A1: *"A chain of liberal people, who are respectful to any new idea and personality. What people think or why they think that way is not considered important. What matters is the benefit of students. Intention is important. Freedom of thought and action is at its maximum level."* (Freedom).

A17: *"Our institutional culture offers the people in our environment an education above what they deserve. We have an atmosphere in which the programs National Education offers are provided, a sound perception of discipline are created and which attaches importance to order and operation."* (Discipline).

Figure 1 also displays the negative definitions of school administrators about institutional culture. Of the opinions stated, 17 were under this category. The most frequently stated administrator opinions were placed under the *"Lack of Communication"* theme. Opinions under the *"Independency"* theme had opposite meanings from the opinions placed under the positive theme *"Freedom"*. It was observed that the feeling of independency precluded the feeling of loyalty to school, and the shareholders attached importance to individuality. Three opinions were stated for the *"Lack of Goals"* and *"Lack of Experience"* themes. It was emphasized that groups who had no specific goals were far from success and lacked the perception of unity-solidarity. Inexperienced workers were also stated to have negative reflections in adopting the culture and sustaining it. Finally, the uncertainties within the school were expressed as negative characteristics by both administrators.

Administrator opinions about the cultural definition of their institution are given below, together with the theme they were placed under:

A34: *"Due to the region, our school has a multifunctional and complex structure. There are also too many buildings which causes a formal atmosphere between workers, due to a lack of communication. This is an undesired outcome for cultural unity."* (Lack of Communication).

A41: *"We have an atmosphere where no one cares about anything, and where everyone is independent from each other. Although it's a small school, there is no evidence of an institutional culture because teachers have lost their respect towards each other and are experiencing professional burnout."* (Independency).

A12: *"Culture is a concept which emerges in time. When I consider the school I work in, I can say that culture has only recently emerged. There is an uncertainty about the teacher-student-parent triangle on how to conduct what within the institution. This information is enough to describe our institution. Uncertainty stands out very much."* (Uncertainty).

Administrator opinions about the difference of their institution's culture from other institutions' cultures were categorized under two titles as positive and negative. Of the opinions stated, 56 administrator opinions were observed to be positive and 37 were negative. Figure 2 displays the thematic scheme for the total of 93 categorized opinions stated by the participants.
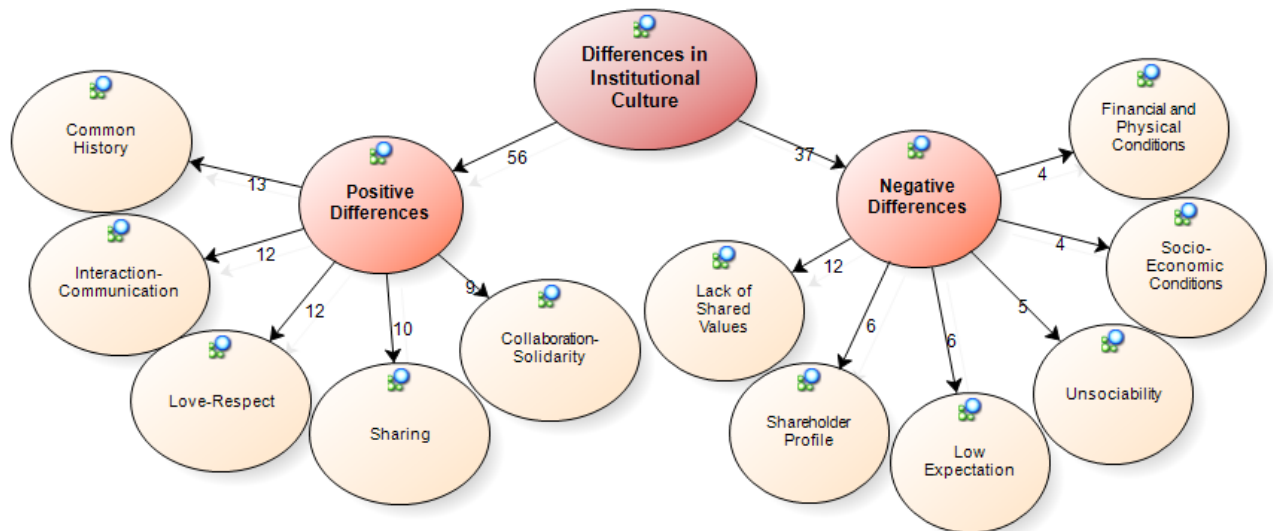


**Figure 2.** Administrator opinions on the differences between their and other institutions' cultures

School administrators stated positive opinions about their institution's culture, whilst also being critical. When the positive opinions are considered, the 13 opinions can be summarized as "having a common history" as their main difference from other cultures. Having a common history, value, understanding, and goals were observed as significant differences. Of the opinions, 12 were placed under the *"Interaction-Communication"* theme, along with the *"Love-Respect"* theme. The fact that teachers support each other with their knowledge and share their experiences was placed under the "*Sharing*" theme. Nine different opinions stated by the school administrators were placed under the "*Collaboration-Solidarity*" theme. Outstanding administrator opinions are given below with the theme they were placed under:

A44: "*The most important thing that distinguishes my institution is that it protects its history. People fail to forget what they experience at school and build their future on this. The happy and sad moments they experience in the past connect them to each other.*" (Common History).

A15: "*There is a sense of us rather than the self. We made all the workers (shareholders) a partner of the school administration. 'We are strong when we are together' - this was our slogan. We awarded every activity of our workers by recognizing every skill worth complimenting. We assigned everyone authority along with responsibility. We always remained one step ahead of other institutions.*" (Sharing)*.

A29: "*The most prominent feature of our institution that differentiates it from others is that it constantly collaborates and makes decisions with the institutions in which the students it trained work in.*" (Collaboration-Solidarity).

Of the participant opinions, 37 were about the differences of their institutional culture, and were categorized as negative opinions. *"Lack of Shared Values"* was the theme that received the highest number of administrator opinions. Opinions such as their institution failing to set a shared objective, avoiding their past, and disclaiming the features unique to them were placed under this theme. The fact that teachers have low expectations from the students and the system, and that only a few students have goals concerning their future were asserted as issues that should be focused upon. These opinions were placed under the *"Low Expectation"* theme. Opinions stating that internal and external shareholders of the school significantly affect its culture were placed under the *"Shareholder Profile"* theme. The avoidant attitudes of students towards social activities were placed under the *"Unsociability"* theme. The *"Financial and Physical Feasibilities"* and *"Socio-Economic State"* themes, in which administrators stated four opinions, were among the themes including negative opinions about institutional culture.

Some of the administrator opinions about the negative differences are given below, together with the theme they were placed under:

A27: *"We still don't have an institutional culture in our school. This is a big disadvantage for us. Hopefully we will resolve this problem. We also have double shift education in our school. This is another factor for preventing institutional culture emergence. We have classes from 8 in the morning to 8 in the evening. The staff does not have any recess or afternoon breaks. We have no common experiences. We have no stories to share. This is a striking disadvantage."* (Lack of Shared Values).

A38: *"Teacher, parent and student expectations are at minimum level. This is an obstacle for the future. Culture embodies the past, the present and the future. This is the drawback of our school."* (Low Expectation).

A51: *"When we compare our institution with the other institutions in the district (TEOG etc. exams) we are always in last place. Being distant from the center is the major reason for this, but I don't see it as the only reason. The primary reason, as we stated before, is cultural corruption. The reason for this is the indifference of students and parents. Students and parents of other institutions are wiser, unlike the ones in our institution."* (Shareholder Profile).

A54: *"One negative feature of our school are asocial people. Even the newcomers join this group of people. Everyone recoils into their own shell. A common culture doesn't emerge because people don't have common experiences."* (Unsociability).

Figure 3 displays the theme of characteristics which define and determine culture based on school administrator opinions. Under this category, 68 opinions were stated. The opinions were evaluated by experts and placed under seven themes.
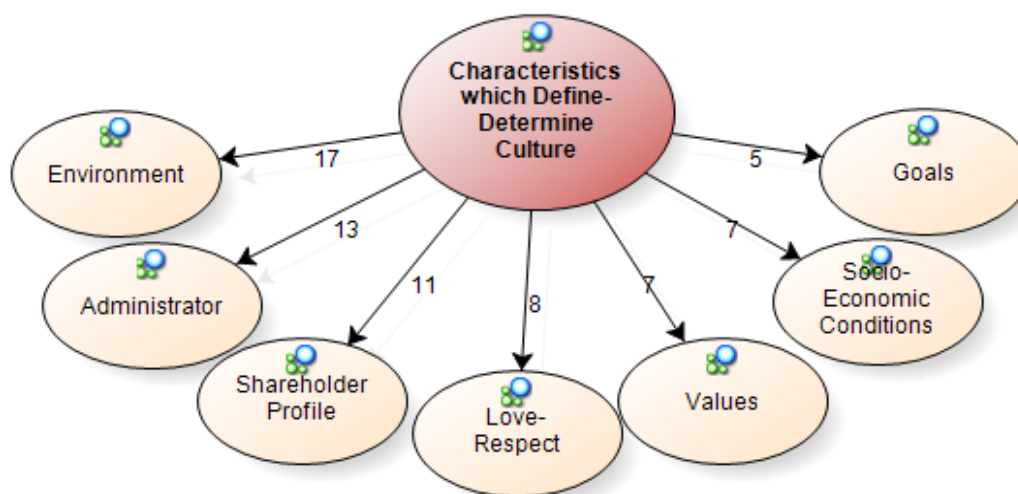
**Figure 3.** Characteristics that define and determine culture according to administrators

The most common participant opinions were placed under the *"Environment"* theme. School administrators who participated in the study stated that administrators have crucial effects on culture. A total of 11 opinions were placed under *"Shareholder Profile"*. Love-respect, which is an inevitable feature for people who live together, was placed under this category. *"Values"* and *"Socio-Economic Condition"* themes were evaluated according to seven opinions of the administrators. Finally, goals, which are elements that determine culture, were also emphasized by the administrators. Outstanding administrator opinions concerning the characteristics which define and determine culture are given below with the themes they were placed under.

A5: *"I think environment is the most crucial element which defines and determines institutional culture. Environment is the setting which embodies culture. Environment and culture nest within each other. A positive culture emerges based on the extent of the positive environment. But the reverse is also possible."* (Environment).

A47: *"A region's socio-economic conditions and administrators' attitudes towards the institution affect the institution's culture. The biggest responsibility in shaping institutional culture is assigned to the school principal. The reason for this is because the principal can make future planning based on current situations."* (Administrator).

A56: *"Value judgments within an institution affect both the individuals and the school. If there are values then everyone in the school is valuable. Everyone protects these values and strives to develop new ones. Thus, values undertake a role in determining the culture."* (Values).

A13: *"The concept we define as culture is based on humans. Humans continue their existence with their experiences. Socio-economic conditions are crucial within schools. Schools with a parent profile with a good socio-economic condition carry out more radical activities. When the socio-economic conditions are low, then interest and care are at low levels as well. It is even more difficult to explain this to family members and students. That's why we fail to create a sound environment."* (Socio-Economic Condition).

## Conclusion and Discussion

This study, which aimed at examining school administrators' perceptions on institutional culture, was conducted on 56 school administrators. Study data were collected through the interview form developed by the researcher. The data were analyzed through the content analysis method. Several participant opinions which were deemed significant are presented in the study in their original form.

When the related literature is considered, there are findings indicating that school administrators have both positive and negative opinions regarding school culture, and that those they undertake a possessive role in creating and protecting school culture. In similar studies conducted on school administrators, the item "everyone wants a high level of success" was perceived with a high average (Ipek, 1999; Kubiatko & Arik, 2014; Simsek, 2014). In a study conducted by Pulat (2010), participants stated that they "disagreed" with the item "everyone wants a high level of success". The reason for this difference could be due to school administrators attaching importance to collaboration and solidarity. In a study carried out by Yalazan (2006), the school administrator was observed to keep the workers away from reactions that prevent collaboration and creative thinking, and from unnecessary power plays and messages. However, school administrators were stated to be incompetent in receiving professional external help on issues such as changing the old traditions in the school culture and introducing a new value system, in introducing new products, services and values and in developing new creative ideas. Negative effects of the physical structure and lack of school budget were stated both in this study and in the study conducted by Karadag and Ozdemir (2015).

When the cultural definitions of schools administrators about their institutions are considered, there are both positive and negative perceptions. Positive perceptions were displayed under eight themes and negative perceptions under five themes. While "*Love-Respect*" theme received the most positive opinions, "*Change-Innovation*" received the least number of positive opinions. "*Lack of Communication*" received the most number of negative opinions, and "*Uncertainty*" received the least number of negative opinions. According to a study conducted by Aydogdu-Ozoglu (2015), there are some nationwide educational changes which cause uncertainty, and this certainty leads to negative effects on school culture. "*Collaboration-Solidarity*" theme was another positive theme in which a high number of opinions were expressed. Findings of this study are different from the results of the study conducted by Ayik and Sayir (2015) on teachers. In their study it was suggested that there is a hesitation towards teacher collaboration, which is one of the dimensions of school culture. According to another study, there are positive feelings and thoughts such as collaboration, success, support, and possessing among the workers responsible for the operation of the school (Simsek & Babaoglan, 2015).

Administrator opinions, concerning the differences between their institution's culture and other institutions' cultures, were placed under two categories as positive differences and negative differences. Five themes were placed under positive differences and six themes were placed under negative differences. "*Common History*" was the theme which obtained the most opinions for positive differences. This finding is in line with the study conducted by Ozturk and Maral (2015) on vice-principals. The study suggests that a one unit increase in organizational culture will enable a 0.523 increase in organizational loyalty. It was stated

that there is a positive, linear relationship between these two variables. A study, which supports the negative *"Unsociability"* theme, was conducted by Uzuntarla, Goksel, and Kilic (2015). The study suggested that activities, projects, and practices which can support the communication and collaboration between the personnel, educational staff, and the students should be carried out in order to empower the school culture. This will inevitably help the organization function effectively. In their study, MacNeil, Prater, and Busch (2009) stated that students will get more successful results in a sound school culture.

Administrator opinions regarding the characteristics which define and determine culture were collected under seven themes. Of the opinions stated, 68 were under this category. While *"Environment"* was most expressed by administrators, *"Goals"* was the theme which received the least opinions. The *"Administrator"* theme, which received 13 opinions, is in line with the study conducted by Ozdemir (2006) titled "Expected and Observed Behaviors of School Principals in Creating and Introducing School Culture". According to Ozdemir's study, which was conducted under the counseling of ministry inspectors, expectations of school principals in creating school culture are higher than the observed behaviors. This indicates that school administrators are expected to do even more.

An administrator who is trying to understand the school culture should examine and define the existing culture. What comes next can be listed as focusing on the goals of the school, constantly and clearly being a role model of school values, responding to and taking part in risky events that occur within the school and rewarding the students and shareholders as a sign of motivation and appreciation (Celikten, 2003). Studies conducted by Leithwood and Jantzi (1990), Hoy (1990), Hallinger and Heck (1998), and Jacobson (2011) have identified how crucial the role of school administrators are in creating a school culture. With this respect, creating schools with a sound culture and where the teachers strive in harmony with each other for a shared goal will lead the education system to success. This is possible by selecting, training, and promoting a qualified school administrator. At this point, it is crucial to review and improve the current policies for training and appointing school principals.

One other important finding of the study was about the negative effect of educational policy changes on school culture. Previous studies conducted by Ustuner (2004), Gur and Celik (2009), Kosterelioglu and Bayar (2013), Papadopoulou and Yirci (2013), and Kartal, Yirci, and Ozdemir (2015), underlined the problems that frequent educational policy changes cause on education systems. Informing the shareholders and seeking their opinions about radical changes which will be made to the educational system can help prevent some of the potential problems caused by such changes. Thus, this study, which was conducted on school principals, could also be conducted with different study groups. With this respect, problems which can be encountered in schools can be identified based on the opinions of students, parents, and other shareholders. It is known that student success and harmony-collaboration among teachers increases within a healthy school culture. Thus, educational policymakers should focus on finding an answer to the question about how a sound culture can be developed in schools.

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