

The Organisational Aspect of School: An Empirical Study Concerning Teachers' Perceptions about School Memories and Values in Primary Education in Greece

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Abstract

The main objective of this particular research is to provide a theoretical analysis and investigate teachers' perceptions about school memories and values inside the school community. More particularly, besides the 'conventional' learning, there is another kind of learning taking place at schools concerning the organizational process people experience. In fact, in the school community values, roles, responsibilities and behaviour are also being learned. The results of the specific research, through interviews postulate the aforementioned fact, whereas the organizational process young people experience develops in depth our understanding of how it affects their well-being and school performance.

Keywords: Organisation Aspect, School Memories, Values, Primary Education, Greece

Introduction

In 1970 Brian Davies (1970: 250) argued that 'we lack anything like an adequate sociology of the school and that one aspect of that lack is in terms of our knowledge of schools as organisations'. This quote from over 40 years ago is still apt today.

When people think of the schooling they tend to think of teaching and learning methods and outcomes and the obstacles to teaching and learning, such as truancy, learning disabilities and misbehaviour. However, there is another kind of learning occurring in schools; young people are not only learning the curriculum in the classroom but also learning from the organizational process they are experiencing in the whole school (Androutsou, 2013). This organisational process they experience is also part of the pedagogy of schooling. The school is an organisation; indeed it is the first organization we have a formal relationship with and remains so during the most formative years of our life. Based on the experience we have there

we learn about how power, leadership, group processes, self-esteem and even bullying are used in organisations.

At school young people learn what role they can, and are allowed, to take in organisational life. As we are learning how the school as an organization works we are also learning how to take roles there - a way of relating to the school as a system. These particular roles we find play a major part in defining our sense of self, and particularly our sense of agency and self esteem as adults. Successful organisations and schools in particular should be able to create a positive climate by sustaining caring connections, providing positive behavioral supports and teaching social and emotional skills (Pashiardis, 2001).

According to Handy and Aitken (1986) who provided those concerned with schools, with an introduction to pieces of organisational theory, schools are more difficult and perhaps more complex than any other organisations because of the expectations laid upon them and of the critical place they have in our society.

Unfortunately, there is continuing reluctance to examine schools as organisations (Montgomery & Kehoe, 2012) as examining schools as organisations would involve many different aspects. Therefore, the specific study aims at shedding light to how teachers perceive the kind of learning that occurs inside the school community.

Literature Review

According to literature, there is no single generally accepted definition of a learning organisation. Leithwood and Aitken (1995: 63) define a learning organisation as, a group of people pursuing common purposes (individual purposes as well) with a collective commitment to regularly weighing the value of those purposes, modifying them when that makes sense, and continuously developing more effective and efficient ways of accomplishing those purposes. The most commonly mentioned elements of a learning organisation, according to Keating (1995), could be summarised as:

- coordinated group efforts towards commonly shared goals
- active commitment to continuous improvement and to the diffusion of best practices throughout the organisation;
- horizontal networks of information flow to help bring together expertise as well as links with the external world
- the ability to understand, analyse, and use the dynamic system within which they are functioning.

Musgrave (1968) examining the school from an organisational perspective suggests that an organisational approach will result in better teaching, as teachers will have a greater awareness of both the external forces and of the internal processes that affect schools. It is essential for any organisation, including schools, to reach its goals and therefore a major emphasis must be put on the problem of who has the power and how it is used.

Everard and Morris (1996) explain in detail how schools as organisations should be managed so as to meet their goals -purposes and prepare young people for their uncertain future. The effective school management includes the following elements:

- Recognizing the individual's talents of all kinds and degrees and developing this intellectual, physical and creative capacity.
- Developing a curriculum, which is flexible enough, to respond to the sensible needs of students at different ages and stages.
- Enabling students to acquire the required education relating to the necessity to earn a living and, when appropriate, to enter into skilled occupations and professions.

- Seeking to measure the extent to which an individual is being successful in making the maximum use of natural gifts and opportunities.
- Accepting responsibility for identifying the physical, aesthetic, creative, emotional and social needs of each individual student as a necessary starting point to satisfy these needs.
- Maintaining the school as a caring community emphasizing the central importance of good human relationships based upon sensitivity, tolerance, good will and a sense of humour.
- Fostering habits of responsibility, self-discipline, initiative, endeavour and individual judgment.
- Obtaining a positive response to the needs of a changing society whilst emphasizing established fundamental values and standards.
- Securing the active involvement of all people concerned with the school's welfare, staff, students, governors, parents and the authority, in the continuous reassessment.

In figure 1 that follows Everard and Morris (1996) picture school as an organisation in its environment:

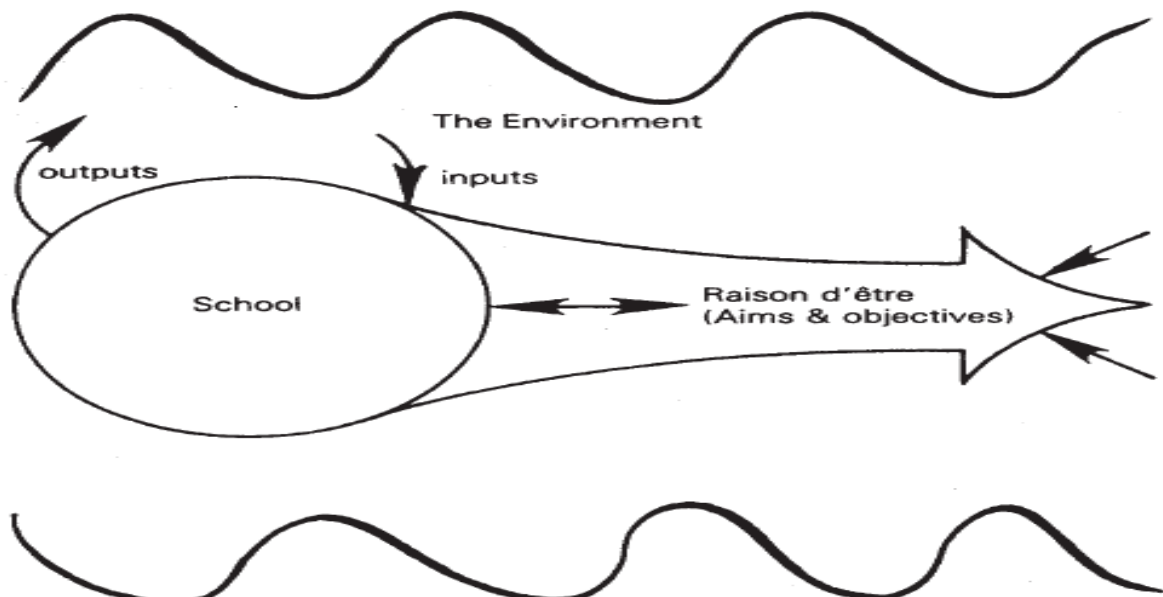


Figure 1: A school in its environment (Everard & Morris, 1996: 148)

- All in all, the organisational aspect of schools should be taken into serious consideration as schools, like any other organisations should be actively managed against goals (Androutsou, 2013). Schools need to be managed effectively so as to pursue their purpose and goals by forming groups of individuals, building them into effective working units or teams and getting these teams working harmoniously together.

Aims / Purpose of the Research

As has already been well documented, there is significant resistance to viewing school as an organisation and the use of interviews that tap memories have the potential to reveal that way in which the organisation imprinted itself upon individuals. But what do young people themselves think about their school lives? What do they claim they have learned from school and how their school years prepared them for the future? It is true that many people relish their schooldays having positive memories from school as they liked their teachers and

enjoyed most of their subjects. These people were good enough at specific things the school valued and felt they had a reasonable chance of doing well enough in their exams (Claxton, 2008). In a survey in charter schools using the Montessori Method (Brogan, 2010), children remember that they were interested in learning from their mistakes and they also remember they wanted to feel they were around people they knew. The survey took place in the River Valley Charter School in Newburyport, Massachusetts, which had been operated for more than twelve years by Christine Cohenn, Jeanne Schultz, and Bonnie Bowes who wanted to show that charter schools offer one potential solution for rethinking education. In another survey which was based on descriptive essays of 410 graduates in the USA most of the participants had positive responses from school days when they acquired mastery of material or when they experienced feelings of gaining competency (Rothenberg, 1994). People wrote that they remember having pleasant and positive feelings when learning the multiplication tables, conquering geometry, writing an essay, learning to ski or giving a speech. Undoubtedly, the aforementioned students were the few but lucky and fortunate ones. Perhaps the most interesting thing when searching what people remember they have learned at school is that there are few scientific articles related to that subject. Instead, there are several surveys in which people answer questions related to what they thought of their school or how they felt when being at school. Unfortunately, most of the people being questioned have unpleasant and negative memories from their experience of school as a whole (Claxton, 2008). The configuration of the values learned at school is an area accessible to the educational intervention and for this reason we strongly believe that this field should be the subject of systematic pedagogical research. The main aims of the research we have conducted are:

1. The correction, supplementation and diversification of the image in relation to the hitherto existing domestic and foreign research.
2. The exploration of some key factors which influence or jointly shape school memories through organisational aspect.

Through this research we additionally attempt to:

1. Provide guidance and feedback to the teacher so as to upgrade the quality of the class.
2. Develop a picture of the learning of values in regular classes of primary schools of our country (Greece), and finally
3. Compare our survey data with data from other foreign researches concerning the study of the organisational learning taking place inside the school community.

The analysis of the schools as organisations will include interviews on what people remember from their experiences of school. This is a retrospective method, with all the biases inherent in such an approach, which will provide us with important reflections of individuals upon their school as an organisation. Such an indirect approach is preferable to a more direct approach whereby one could ask teachers to reflect upon their organisational experiences in school. As has been well documented, there is significant resistance to viewing school as an organisation and the use of interviews that tap memories have the potential to reveal that way in which the organisation imprinted itself upon individuals.

All in all, the organisational climate of a school fosters environmental understanding, competence and control as well as academic learning (Uline et al., 2009). There is no doubt that it is important to analyse schools as organisations as while we are learning how the school as an organization works we are also learning values as well as how to take roles there - a way

of relating to the school as a system. The roles we find play a major part in defining not only our sense of self, but also particularly our sense of agency and self esteem as adults.

Research Methodology

The particular research method was conducted through the use of interviews on what people remember from their experiences of school. This is a retrospective method, with all the biases inherent in such an approach, which will provide us with important reflections of individuals upon their school as an organisation. Such an indirect approach is preferable to a more direct approach whereby one could ask teachers to reflect upon their organisational experiences in school. The interviews were conducted from January 2011 until April 2011. At the time of data collection all of the participants were teachers working in Primary schools in major cities all over Greece as the sample population comprised participants according to geographical diversity. The twenty participating teachers were between 25-56 years old. Fourteen of the participants were permanently appointed teachers whereas six of them were temporarily appointed for this particular school year. The majority of the participants were female (n=13). The temporarily appointed teachers were actively working for the last four years while the tenure of experienced teachers exceeded 10 years. Table 1 presents the demographic data of the participants:

Table 1

Statistic data about the profile of the teachers who participated in the interview

Gender	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Male	7	35
Female	13	65
TOTAL	20	100
Educational level	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
PhD	1	10
MA, MBA	3	30
TOTAL	4	40
Years of teaching experience	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
0- 10 years	6	30
10- 20 years	13	65
20-30 years	1	5
TOTAL	20	100

The initial interviews included five questions, whereas the first one examined school memories and values learned and were supported by follow-up questions, which were intended to prompt the participants to share more information and/or clarify ideas that were expressed. By employing a personal narrative-based research methodology, we provided a voice for the participants of this study. The following was the initial question used:

What do you remember from your time in school?

The main priority of the researcher was to create a cosy and trustworthy atmosphere with the respondents so as to be able to investigate their opinions as well as their experiences. The intended purpose of the investigator was to ask the questions and let the respondents answer freely without interfering or leading them.

It is very important in this point to stress the fact that the teachers being interviewed had no knowledge at all of what they were going to be asked about. The only thing they were informed about was that they were going to be asked some questions relative to their personal experience concerning school and their profession. Before being interviewed the participants taking part were given a consent form to study carefully and then they were asked to sign it so as for the researcher to have their consent.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used in order to analyse data as it allows the organisation of data in themes and categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, it is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data. It minimally organises and describes the data set in rich detail, but it also often goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Voyiatzis, 1998).

Accordingly, thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants, whereas it also examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The six-phase process of analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (2006) was followed: First of all the analysis involved repeated readings of the interview transcripts so as to produce an initial coding. After that all relevant codes were collated into themes and then themes were identified between our categorisations in order to create the thematic map of our data. Specific extracts of the transcripts were coded for the readers to make our arguments about the research questions and verify our interpretations, whereas the participants' names were not mentioned in order to maintain the anonymity of research.

Difficulties and Barriers Faced During the Research

The research methodology applied during this particular study, as in any other, includes certainly some restrictive elements (Stamelos & Dakopoulou, 2006). We will attempt to expose below the most important ones.

There were a number of obstacles that needed to be considered when conducting the research especially since the participants of the research were going to be primary school teachers. More specifically, teachers in primary schools in Greece are not used in participating in research procedures concerning the organisational aspect of schools so there was danger of facing a sense of unwillingness on their behalf. There is no doubt that people who are not accustomed to taking part in research procedures do sense the fear of the 'unknown', fortunately though, in our case we managed to overcome the aforementioned obstacle.

Additionally, the fact that questions in interviews were going to be used as research tools might constitute a problem of bias and subjectivity. There is always the possibility that participants, intentionally or unintentionally, may give inaccurate information about the subject being asked. In this case it is of crucial importance to create a relaxed and safe atmosphere so that the participants will feel free to express their thoughts, feelings and beliefs. To put it in another way we tried to create a psychological contract with the

participants of the study so as to motivate them to become useful partners in our research project.

As far as the limitations of the study are concerned they could be summarised in the following:

- Limitations of time to extend research and include more participants, which can act as a baseline for recommendations for future research.
- The cross-sectional character of the present study, the fact that the variables have only been measured at one time, imposes restrictions on the generalisation of the results, which may be counteracted by a longitudinal follow-up.
- Finally, as is the case in any research, the results might be different if a different sample of participants was taken.

Results

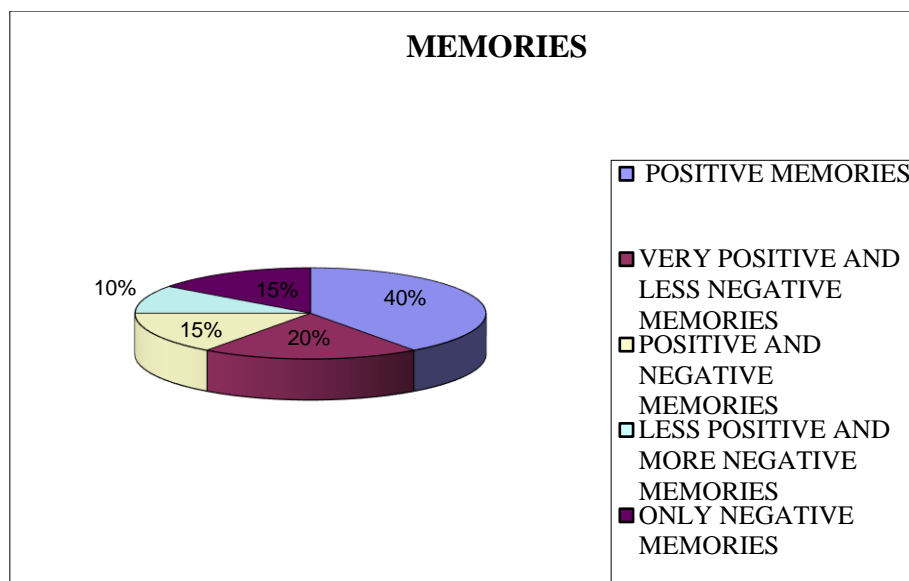
According to the thematic analysis conducted the results of what teachers remember about school and their positive or negative memories are the following: Eight teachers, 40% stated that they have only positive memories from their school years and their whole experience as students, whereas 4 (20%) reported having extremely positive and less negative school memories. On the contrary 3 of the teachers, (15%) being interviewed remember having equally both positive and negative memories whereas only 2 (10%) reported having a few positive memories and a lot more negative ones. Only 3 of the teachers, (15%) being interviewed had only negative things about school and their school days to remember. The memories of the subjects being questioned are presented in table 2 and figure 2.

Table 2

Statistic data about the memories of the teachers who participated in the interview

SCHOOL MEMORIES IN GENERAL		
ONLY POSITIVE MEMORIES	8	40%
VERY POSITIVE AND LESS NEGATIVE MEMORIES	4	20%
POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE MEMORIES	3	15%
LESS POSITIVE AND MORE NEGATIVE MEMORIES	2	10%
ONLY NEGATIVE MEMORIES	3	15%
TOTAL	20	100%

Figure 2: Statistic data about the memories of the teachers who participated in the interview



Furthermore, through the analysis, specific themes emerged which are presented as follows:

Success and Enjoyment from Learning- Gifted Teachers

The theme of success and enjoyment from learning is pervasive among discussions of teachers who present themselves as cheerful and happy students. Overall there was strong emotional content in nearly every teacher being interviewed and most of the positive experiences being mentioned were directly related to specific academic activities. In general enjoying learning was a common theme of the best experiences, usually attributed to a teacher or sometimes to person's own abilities. Interestingly enough, many of these feelings of success focus on the issues of developing competency and identity inside the school environment. According to Erikson (1968) who analyses the tasks that individuals must accomplish, children of elementary school age must feel competent in their work in order to develop a firm sense of their identity in adolescence.

Challenge and Stimulus in Teaching Procedure

Another pervasive theme among the discussions of the teachers is the theme of challenge and stimulus in the teaching procedure. Many of the teachers' positive experiences are strongly associated with challenging and stimulating classes in which teachers brought interesting and helpful material to students.

The most important thing though, is the fact that the students took part in many extracurricular activities with their teachers' guidance and support. These were the teachers who took seriously the student's initiative and helped them prepare and plan their everyday schedule.

Excitement Versus Horror and Physical Abuse

Three of the teachers who took part in the interview reported having equally positive and negative memories from their school life and their whole experience as students. On the one hand school comes as the centre of their universe whereas on the other hand it constitutes a place of horror and misery.

Whereas the best memories were enjoyable, challenging or even mildly good, a number of the negative memories were of devastating scenes of humiliation. Most common were scenes of being beaten in front of one's peers. But besides the physical and corporal abuse

the specific teachers also faced psychological abuse that is threats, belittling statements, bullying, and emotional manipulation. This form of violence may also have devastating, life-long consequences for victims. Psychological abuse includes the verbal abuse directed at individual children and the fear generated by watching the physical punishment of other children (Ennew & Plateau, 2004).

Sense of Negativity and Powerlessness in the school

The theme of powerlessness and negativity in the school environment also prevails in the narration of some of the participants since they mostly recall negative things, which are connected with their experience as students in class. These teachers start their narration by recalling the negative aspects of their school life in the beginning and by the end of their narration they only add a few pleasant experiences from their school years.

It is very important to this point of the analysis to draw our attention to the fact that the negative experiences of the teachers being interviewed derive from the personality and the hostile behaviour of the teachers they used to have when they were students themselves. These teachers as young learners wanted to 'learn' and not just sit back and do what they were told. In fact many of them wanted a form of learning in which they would decide what should be learnt and how it should be learnt. At the same time they yearned to learn by researching and also feel that the learning they were doing was preparing them for the challenges of life. There is no doubt that the role of the teacher has completely changed in the schools today, but still we as teachers and cultivators of young souls should always bear in mind that our main priority is to be equitable, sensitive, respectful, unbiased, honest, and ethical in our relationships with our students. Besides that the role of the teacher needs to be changed to more that of the agent than expert. The new teacher should be a counsellor, a facilitator, a manager of learning situations, a co-ordinator of projects and a team leader (Handy & Aitken, 1986).

Depression, Beating and Physical Abuse

As already being mentioned only 3 of the teachers that is 15% of the whole sample being interviewed had only negative things about school and their school days to remember. These people felt very nervous during the whole time of the interview and they gave me the impression that they wanted to end their narration quite quickly. It is not a coincidence that the interviews of these 3 teachers lasted less time compared to all the others as I can assume that the intensity of their negative feelings was such overwhelming that forced them to desire to give an end to their unpleasant thoughts.

In the narration of the teachers who belong to this category the pattern of beating and physical abuse is also prevalent.

Future Recommendations

The aim was to study and analyse the teachers' memories about their own school experiences, as they can be avenues to understanding and insight. According to Rothenberg (1994), in the case of memories about schooling, things are very thick and richly informative. More particularly, being in 'the thick of things', encapsulates the inescapability of the presence of memory in everyday life, as something we are always stirring up and moving through. This is an appropriate approach for teachers in classrooms, with a background of thousands of hours of memories, and a multitude of classrooms, teachers, and peers from

which to draw. These memories constitute a vast and varied landscape of personal knowledge, beliefs, and understandings.

Some researchers argue that much of who we are is developed during childhood (Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Hennig & Jardim, 1977). Childhood relationships and developmental activities, opportunities, and experiences (including hardships and times of pain) come together to create each human being (Cooke, 2004). Personal events, values and commitments, special circumstances or historical influences that motivate and define people's actions in the future occur during childhood and that is why this period is critical for the development of every human being.

'In the case of memory, we are always in the thick of things' (Casey, 1987). Memories of schooling have much to do with the network of beliefs that one brings to teaching and to learning about teaching. What people remember about schooling becomes a core of their beliefs. In one such use of evidence Holt-Reynolds (1992) defined the belief system as theories that are basically based on untutored interpretations of personal lived experiences.

The role of motivation theory is important when considering and understanding school memories. In several cases people refer to appreciating the areas of school over which they could have some control, such as choices they could make. These examples were mindful of the work on internal motivation of achievement (Brophy, 1983). On another level of motivation theory some of the students ascribed failures or difficult situations to a teacher's personal feeling or to their placement in a particular group (Weiner, 1980).

As far as memories are concerned the most characteristic phrase is the one that Neinhardt (1961) points out 'I did not have to remember these things; they have remembered themselves all these years.' According to Loftus (2011), without memory life would consist of momentary experiences that have little relation to one another. Without memory we could not communicate with other people for we could not remember the ideas we wished to express. Without memory, we would not have the sense of continuity even to know who we are. Memory is central to being human; thus it will come as no surprise that philosophers and scientists have been interested in the subject as far back as recorded history goes.

In this research the subjects were asked to frame their school memories and were encouraged to report both positive and negative aspects of their experience as individual memories can be a route to insight about what we bring to everyday life. There is no doubt that the teaching impact of the occasion of asking teachers to remember their past schooling memories is in itself an avenue for exploration. That is because not only does asking people to remember lead to more introspection but also teachers begin to embed newly learned material in their experience, possibly with insight. All of our school memories enable us to look into the landscape of experience and it is that experience and knowledge that will allow us to teach with intelligent adaptability and flexibility.

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