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The Sources of Organizational Gossips in Schools

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Abstract

Informal and evaluative speech about a person who is not present in a conversation environment is defined as gossip. Gossip is one of the informal forms of communication that is also important in school life, because schools have an intense network of communication. This research aims to detect the sources of organizational gossips in schools that have the potential to harm organizational functioning. A descriptive survey model was applied in the research. Gossip Sources Questionnaire (GSQ) prepared by the researcher was used to investigate the topic. In the research the factors causing gossips in schools are classified as; individual factors stemming from the people themselves, social factors arising from the social environment in which the individuals stay and organizational factors arising from the characteristics of the organizational structure of the workplace. According to the teacher views individual features such as jealousy, envy, unethical behaviors, curiosity, vanity and aimlessness are the most common sources of gossips in schools. At the end of the research, there are some suggestions for teachers and principals about coping techniques of organizational gossips.

Keywords: Gossip, Informal Communication, Teacher, School

1. Introduction

As a social being, people communicate with other people at every stage of life. People share all kinds of feelings, thoughts and ideas with others and communicate with people around them on every issue. While the topic of this interpersonal communication may involve many different elements, they are often about other people and some assumptions about them. In this context, informal and evaluative speeches about a person who is not present in the conversation environment are considered as gossips. Gossip is defined in the Oxford Dictionary (2019) as "casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details which are not confirmed as true." In organizational literature, gossip is defined as; social conversations about the formation, change and continuation of social networks, in the context of the formation of group unity, and generally about the people who are not present in the environment (Difonzo & Bordia, 2007), positive or negative information sharing about third parties in the context of intimacy (Foster, 2004), informal and evaluative speeches in a group

that is usually not more than a few people and who is not usually present (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). In the definitions of the term gossip, the researchers focus on its both positive and negative effects for organizations. Organizational gossip is an important factor in explaining some social characteristics of the organizations. Therefore, investigating the gossips circulating among the employees will enable to understand the social relations in a school. Thomas and Rozell (2007) state that gossip is a natural part of every social environment and has a significant impact on organizational behavior. According to Brady, Brown and Liang (2017) typical workplace gossip can be either positive or negative in nature and may serve important functions. Since gossips form the basis of human social relations (Dunbar, 2004), it is seen as a social phenomenon and an important aspect of organizational communication (Waddington, 2005). In this context, Han and Dağlı (2018) highlight the importance of examining the organizational impacts of gossips in social organizations where human relations have an important role. Determining the sources of gossips in schools will extend the literature of behavioral and management science related to this informal type of communication. Moreover, it may give insight for administrators to deal with the harmful effects of gossips.

Gossips are generally accepted as unethical and immoral behaviors among people, on the other hand, this form of informal communication is quite common in society and organizations. The fact that gossip is exhibited so often in society although seen as a negative behavior by many people shows that gossips have many different and complex sources. Organizational studies have revealed many reasons that cause gossips among employees. Stewart and Strathern, (2004) focus on personal characteristics in spreading gossips. According to them the main reason for explaining and spreading gossips is a component of emotions such as self-proving, revenge, hate and jealousy. Similarly, the research conducted by Luna and Chou, (2013) concluded that the attitudes and subjective norms of individuals are important predictors of intention to gossip. In this context, the results of many studies conducted on gossips (Stewart & Strathern, 2004; Arabacı et al., 2012; Eşkin-Bacaksız & Yıldırım, 2015) show that some negative attitudes and behaviors of people are the main factors that cause them to produce and spread gossips. The researches in the literature focus on the personal characteristic of employees in producing and spreading gossips. Therefore, the personal characteristics of teachers should be taken into consideration in explaining the gossips in schools. In addition to the individual features of employees, there are some other issues that may cause gossips in organization. In this context, the features of schools also may affect the production of gossips. DiFonzo et al., (1994) state that if there is an incomplete information about a situation or the information is not adequately explained employees usually want to learn this information through gossips. That means the communication structure in schools may trigger the gossip circulation among teachers. In this case, it can be claimed that the basic knowledge deficiencies in organizational communication are an important factor in revealing gossips (DiFonzo, Bordia & Rosnow, 1994; Bordia & Rosnow, 1998; Foster, 2004; Solmaz, 2006; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). In the same way, Mills, (2010) states that gossips are more likely to occur when formal communication is limited. In other words, employees try to obtain the information from informal channels when they cannot obtain it from official communication channels in the organizations (Solmaz, 2004). Therefore, the research concludes that congestions in formal communication channels in organizations are among the factors that cause gossips (Doğan, 2002; Berkos, 2003; Solmaz, 2004; Stewart & Strathern, 2004; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Mills, 2010; Eşkin-Bacaksız & Yıldırım, 2015; Bahar, 2016). Considering the effects of gossip on organizations, it is seen that there are features that stem from both the structure of the organization and the characteristics of the employees. It is seen that organizational gossip has a very critical function in schools, which are educational organizations with intense social relations. In this respect, the organizational functions of gossip are a current research topic for schools and teachers.

Gossip is one of the informal forms of communication that is also considered important in school life, which is surrounded by a network of communication. Eckhaus and Ben-Hador (2019) identified gossip as the most negative feature of school life. Teachers spend most of their working time in school, where they share feelings, ideas, thoughts about other people. In such environment the speeches about others should be under control. Uncontrolled gossips may cause problems in schools. Thomas and Rozell, (2007) state that distortion of information in the gossip network may become a big problem in the organizations. Michelson and Mouly (2004) mention many damages that gossip can cause to organizations. Babalola, et al. (2019) emphasize the potential harm of negative workplace gossip on employees' innovative behavior. The most prominent of these are demoralizing employees, reducing productivity and causing waste of time. In the same way, Kurland and Pelled,

(2000) focus on the damage of gossip on the reputation of the person in society. Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell and Labianca, (2010) also found out that gossips have negative consequences such as decreased productivity, demoralization, damage to emotions and reputations, and employee turnover. In this regard, school administrators have to deal with harmful gossips in order to maintain a positive climate in the school. In the process of combating harmful gossips, first of all, it is necessary to determine the situations and causes which lead gossips. Unidentified gossips cannot be controlled and may harm the school climate and the performance of teachers. Therefore, gossips in schools should be investigated in order to decrease their negative effects. In this regard, the reasons of the gossips circulated among the teachers in the schools constituted the starting point of this research. Identifying the sources of organizational gossips in schools is expected to enrich the related literature by pioneering the studies in the field of behavioral management. After determining the sources of organizational gossips in schools, this study identifies some techniques to deal with gossips that have the potential to harm organizational functioning.

1.1. Purpose of the research

The aim of this study is to investigate the sources of organizational gossips in schools and to develop some techniques to eliminate the harmful effects of the negative gossips.

2. Method

This research investigates the gossips in schools according to teacher views by survey model. With a descriptive research, the reasons for an existing situation in schools were investigated. Descriptive survey models aim to describe a situation as it is (Karasar, 1998). In this type of research, the opinions of the participants on a subject or event, interests, skills, abilities and attitudes, etc. are tried to be defined within their own conditions (Büyüköztürk, et al., 2011). In this study, as the sources of the rumors in schools were examined in the context of organizational conditions, the survey model was preferred.

The study group of the research, the measurement tool and the process of conducting the research are explained below.

21. Study group of the research

In the research, by using convenient sampling technique 79 teachers working at the schools in Diyarbakır/Turkey were determined. In the determining of the sample by using maximum variation the teachers were chosen from different branch, seniority, gender and schools. Some of the personal characteristics of the teachers who participated in the research are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Some features of the participants

Branch	N	%	Seniority	N	%	Gender	N	%
Social sciences	51	64,6	1-2 years	44	55,7	Male	39	49,4
Science	22	27,8	3- 5 years	30	38,0	Female	40	50,6
Others	6	7,6	6 and more	5	6,3	Total	79	100,0
Total	79	100,0	Total	79	100,0			

As shown in Table 1, in terms of gender, 49.4% (n=39) of the participants were male and 50.6% (n=40) were female; 64.6% (n=51) were employed in social sciences, 27.8% (n=22) in natural science and 7.6% (n=6) in other fields (physical education, sports etc.). In terms of the seniority of teachers 55.7% (n=44) were working for 1-2 years, 38.0% (n=30) 3-5 years and 6.3% (n=5) 6 years and more. All the teachers are in public schools and working full time. All of the teachers were in public schools so they have similar income, showing that they have similar socio-economic features. The schools were located in city center and had similar features and

opportunities. The focus of the research is not the different features of participants; instead it focuses on general teacher views related to gossip sources in schools.

2.2. Gossip Sources Questionnaire (GSQ)

In this study, a questionnaire was used to determine the sources of gossips in schools. In the preparation process of the questionnaire, the related literature was reviewed and the possible situations that may cause gossips were determined. In order to develop the questionnaire form, the cases which were thought to be causes of organizational gossips among teachers were listed. By this way, a draft framework with 40 expressions was prepared. After examining the draft form, similar expressions, complex and unclear items were deleted. The remaining items were sent to two different researchers to take expert opinion. At the end of review process, "Gossip Sources Questionnaire" (GSQ) with 30 items was created.

In the "Gossip Sources Questionnaire" (GSQ) there are 3 main categories showing sources of gossips in schools. In the first part of the GSQ there are 14 items showing *individual factors* of gossip sources such as "jealousy and envy, exposing the shortcomings of others, weakness of ethical values, satisfying curiosity, need to prove himself, underestimating people, aimlessness, excess of leisure time, covering his own flaws, the desire to take revenge on his dislikes, lack of self-confidence, hate, grudge, not trusting people, lack of motivation, disregarding rivals". In the second part of the GSQ there are 9 items showing *social factors* of gossip sources such as "unhealthy communication in school, fulfill the need to speak something, having different political ideas, conflicts in school, to be admitted in society, learn about people without having to ask them, having a good time and having fun, romantic relationships among teachers, the need to know people in school". In the third part of the GSQ there are 7 items showing *organizational factors* of gossip sources such as "not satisfied with the working environment, not treating employees equally and fairly, monotonous working environments, inadequate chance to express thoughts at school, unexpected promotions and awards, manager changes in the organization, changes in the structure and functioning of the organization". In the questionnaire the participants are given the option to sign the items that they consider as the sources of gossips in schools. In the questionnaire the participants can choose as many options as they want.

2.3. Data collection and analysis process

In the data collection process, the researcher visited the schools and after taking the permission from the school administration the teachers were informed about the research. Totally 79 volunteer teachers from different schools were accepted to participate in the research. The teachers were asked to fill in the paper-based forms of "Gossip Sources Questionnaire" (GSQ). In case of need, some more explanations were provided related to the filling the forms. In the questionnaire the teachers were free to mark as many items as they want. That means they chose more than one items that they consider as the sources of gossips in school. By this way, 79 teachers expressed totally 1005 views in the GSQ. The analysis was conducted by using these views.

After collecting the forms, the researcher made relevant arrangements for analysis. By using SPSS program, the data was analyzed. Descriptive analysis, percentages and frequency analysis were conducted to calculate the most frequent gossip sources. At the first stage, the item analysis was used to determine the frequency of each item. Then, the total frequency of the dimensions (individual, social, organizational) was calculated. The analyses were interpreted according to the frequency of the item/dimension-based. High frequency of the item/dimension means that the teachers consider this situation in the related item/dimension causes gossips in schools. The findings were visualized with graphics and tables and the explanations were provided under each table/graphic.

3. Findings

In this section, the findings of the research related to the sources of gossips in schools according to the views of teachers are given.

3.1. Frequencies of teachers' views on gossip sources

In this study, in order to investigate the causes of organizational gossips circulating among teachers, the teachers were asked to indicate the sources of gossip that they observe most frequently in their schools. The frequency of each expression was calculated based on teacher views. Table 3 presents the frequencies of teachers' views on gossip sources.

Table 3: Frequencies regarding gossip sources according to teachers' views

	Gossip Sources	n
Individual factors *(n= 518)*	Jealousy and envy	55
	Exposing the shortcomings of others	50
	Weakness of ethical values	49
	Satisfying curiosity	45
	Need to prove himself	44
	Underestimating people	27
	Aimlessness, excess of leisure time	42
	Covering his own flaws	35
	The desire to take revenge on his dislikes	32
	Lack of self-confidence	32
	Hate, grudge	30
	Not trusting people	29
	Lack of motivation	19
	Disregarding rivals	29
Social factors *(n=295)*	Unhealthy communication in school	34
	Fulfill the need to speak something	34
	Having different political ideas	44
	Conflicts in school	39
	To be admitted in society	37
	Learn about people without having to ask them	30
	Having a good time and having fun	24
	Romantic relationships among teachers	29
	The need to know people in school	24
Organizational factors *(n= 192)*	Not satisfied with the working environment	40
	Not treating employees equally and fairly	33
	Monotonous working environments	32
	Inadequate chance to express thoughts at school	31
	Unexpected promotions and awards	21
	Manager changes in the organization	20
	Changes in the structure and functioning of the organization	15

As seen in Table 3, according to teacher views the most common sources of organizational gossips are respectively; jealousy and envy (n=55), exposing the shortcomings of others (n=50), weakness of ethical values (n=49), satisfying curiosity (n=45), need to prove himself (n=44), having different political ideas (n=44), aimlessness, excess of leisure time (n=42). The item-based frequency analyses show that personal characteristics of teachers such as jealousy, envy, unethical behaviors, curiosity, vanity, aimlessness are seen as the sources of emerging gossips in school environment. Moreover, teachers emphasize the role of social factors in gossips. They stated that "having different political ideas" is an efficient source of gossips.

3.2. Factors sourcing gossips

The views of the teachers about the sources of gossip were examined in terms of their content and evaluated in three categories. These are *individual*, *social* and *organizational* factors causing gossips in schools.
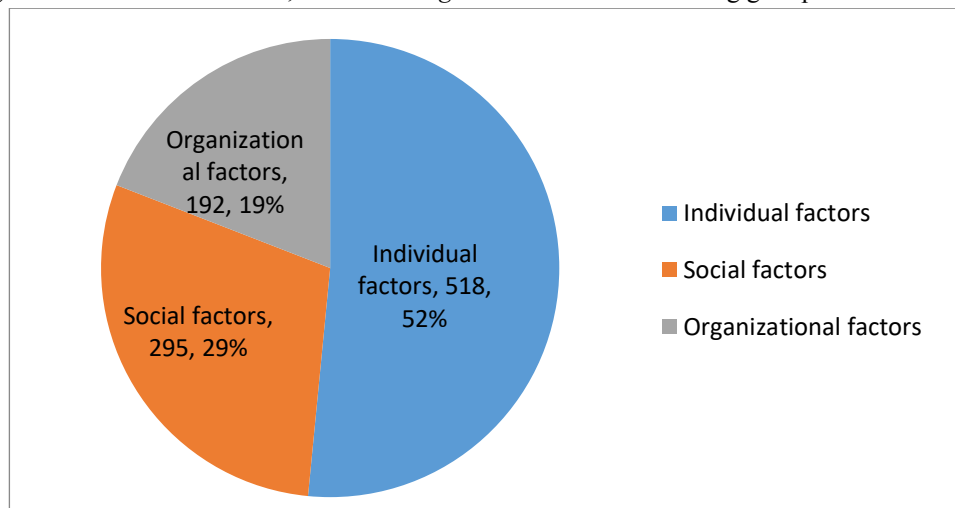
Graphic 1: Individual, social and organizational sources of gossip

As seen in Graphic 1, the teachers evaluate the *individual factors* (n=519) as the most frequent sources of gossips. Then they consider the *social* (n=295), and *organizational* factors (n=192) as the sources of gossips in schools respectively. Among the participants who stated that gossip is caused by *individual* characteristics, 51.9% is female and 48.1% is male. Among the participants who stated that gossip is caused by *social* characteristics, 53.3% is female and 46.7% is male. Those who stated that gossip is caused by *organizational* factors, 48.5% is female and 51.5 % is male. According to this finding, there is a difference among the views of male and female teachers. Female participants prioritize *social* and *individual* factors in producing gossips in schools, while male participants prioritize *organizational* factors as sources of gossips.

For the dimension-based analysis, the total frequency of the items in this category was calculated. The *individual*, *social* and *organizational* factors, which are stated to be the sources of gossip, are examined in detail below.

3.2.1. Individual factors of gossip
Participant teachers expressed the *individual factors* as the sources of gossips they observed in their schools such as; jealousy and envy, exposing the shortcomings of others, weakness of ethical values, satisfying curiosity, need to prove himself, underestimating people, aimlessness, excess of leisure time, covering his own flaws, the desire to take revenge on his dislikes, lack of self-confidence, hate, grudge, not trusting people, lack of motivation, disregarding rivals. Teacher expressed 512 (%52) views in this category. According to this, it can be claimed that some individual features of teachers may trigger the gossips in schools. The participants are in the opinion that teachers having negative characteristics such as jealousy, envy, unethical behaviors, curiosity, vanity, aimlessness etc. are producing gossips in school environment. Accordingly, they emphasize individual factors as the most common sources of gossips.

3.2.2. Social factors of gossip
Participant teachers expressed the *social factors* as the sources of gossips they observed in their schools such as; unhealthy communication in school, fulfill the need to speak something, having different political ideas, conflicts in school, to be admitted in society, learn about people without having to ask them, having a good time and having fun, romantic relationships among teachers, the need to know people in school. Teacher expressed 295 (%29) views in this category. Therefore, it can be claimed that the social features of the group and the climate of the school may cause gossips in schools. The teachers emphasize the political ideas of the group

(n=44) as sources of gossip. The teachers with different political ideas may express their opposition or rivalry by using gossips. Similarly conflicts among the teachers (n= 39) are listed as the sources of gossips in school.

3.2.3. Organizational factors of gossip

Participant teachers expressed the *organizational factors* as the sources of gossips they observed in their schools such as; not satisfied with the working environment, not treating employees equally and fairly, monotonous working environments, inadequate chance to express thoughts at school, unexpected promotions and awards, manager changes in the organization, changes in the structure and functioning of the organization. Teacher expressed 192 (%19) views in this category. It can be understood that the features of organizations may cause gossips in schools. However, when compared to the individual and social factors organizational factor are less common in producing gossips.

4. Results, Discussion and Recommendations

This research aimed to reveal the sources of organizational gossips circulating among teachers working in public schools. In the research, the factors that cause gossips were investigated according to the views of the participant teachers. According to the findings of the study, teachers stated some factors that cause gossips in schools. In the analysis of the items in the questionnaire form, these factors are classified in three main categories. In this context, the factors that source gossips are listed as; *individual factors* stemming from the people themselves, *social factors* arising from the social of teachers and *organizational factors* arising from the characteristics of the workplace and the school environment. According to the teacher views, gossips in schools are mostly caused by individual, social and then organizational factors respectively.

Teachers within the scope of research stated that individual factors were the most frequent sources of gossip. The teachers expressed the *individual factors* such as; jealousy and envy, exposing the shortcomings of others, weakness of ethical values, satisfying curiosity, need to prove himself, underestimating people, aimlessness, excess of leisure time, covering his own flaws, the desire to take revenge on his dislikes, lack of self-confidence, hate, grudge, not trusting people, lack of motivation, disregarding rivals. According to this, it can be concluded that some individual features of teachers may trigger the gossips in schools. Therefore, in terms of the management of gossips the starting focus should be on the individuals. Since the individual features of teachers are seen as the main sources of gossips, the school administration should focus on personal issues. In coping process with gossips, the principals should try to guide the teachers' personal attitudes and behaviors.

In parallel with this finding of the research, other studies in the literature also reveal that the individual attitudes of people are the source of gossip. Luna and Chou, (2013) found that individuals' attitudes and subjective norms are important predictors of gossip. Similarly, Kuo, Wu and Lin (2018) emphasize the individual attributes (e.g. behavior and attitudes) in explaining workplace gossips. Research has revealed that gossips are more common in intimacy environments (Grosser, et al., 2010), and increase in the extreme competitive environment (Michelson and Mouly 2002). Moreover, Stewart and Strathern, (2004) emphasize that individuals tell and spread gossips because of their feelings such as proving themselves, revenge, hate, jealousy and so on. In a research conducted by Han, (2020a) although gossip is perceived as "fun, tasteful and attractive," it is mostly evaluated as "harmful information." Similarly, Arabacı, et al., (2012) concluded that the gossip in the educational organizations emerged due to the personality traits such as jealousy, incapacity, skepticism and lack of self-confidence. Kong (2018) points the relationship between employees' hostile attribution and negative workplace gossip. In this respect, some elements such as uncertainty, insecurity, curiosity, jealousy, belief and anxiety causes gossips. Wilkie (2019) also states that gossips cause erosion of trust and morale in organizations.

In addition, the teachers in this research stated that "weakness of ethical values" was a reason of producing and spreading the gossips in schools. Similarly, in a research conducted by Eşkin-Bacaksız and Yıldırım, (2015) the weakness of the ethical values also found to cause the emergence of gossips. Considering that some negative behaviors arising from the personal characteristics of the teachers cause gossips in the school environment, some measures should be taken to prevent the harmful effects of gossips in the organizational environment. In this respect, it may be effective to provide individual and collective seminars such as personal development and

effective communication. In order to reduce the negative behaviors of teachers that affect their communication with their colleagues in the school and to ensure them to behave more ethically some trainings should be provided in schools.

Teachers focused on *social factors* as the other sources of gossips. According to the research findings, social factors are among the sources that reveal gossips in schools. These social factors are stated as; the need to know people in school, having a good time and having fun, learn about people without having to ask them, romantic relationships among teachers, unhealthy communication in school, having different political ideas, satisfying curiosity, fulfilling the need to speak something. Therefore, it can be concluded that the social features of the group and the climate of the school may cause gossips in schools. Parallel to the finding of this research, some other studies in the literature have also revealed that social conditions are the sources of gossips. Noon and Delbridge, (1993) consider the gossip as an effort to understand the individual's own social environment. In other words, it can be claimed that gossip serves to strengthen existing relations (Gabriels & Backer, 2016). The research results in this topic conclude that gossips have some important functions in organizations such as; entertaining the audience or attracting social attention (Guerin & Miyazaki, 2006); enhancing social interactions and relationships within networks (Smith, Lucas & Latkin, 1999); strengthening social sharing (Mills, 2010); having benefits for the group (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005); cooperating employees in the organization (Wu, Balliet & Van-Lange, 2016); uniting social groups (Dunbar, 2004); controlling social norms (Vaidyanathan, Khalsa & Ecklund, 2016); giving social approval (Litman, Huang & Chang, 2009); strengthening social ties (Brondino, Fusar-Poli & Politi, 2016); contributing to the convergence and socialization of employees (Çalıkuşu, et al., 2013); sharing the secrets (Ditmarsch, et al., 2017); allowing the formation of groups (Savarimuthu, 2013). According to this, there are different social situations in schools that cause the gossips among teachers. Some of these social factor may cause innocent gossips that do not deteriorate the social unity and positive climate in schools. However, some social conditions such as "unhealthy communication and conflicts among teachers" bear the potential to harm the social relationships in school. In this context, Babalola et al. (2019) found that negative workplace gossip may have more serious implications for targets' affective and performance responses at work.

The teacher in the research listed the "different political ideas" of the teachers as a source of gossips in school. That is the teachers with different political ideas may use gossips as a tool to revenge or t harm for his opponents. Considering that organizational gossips may harm the school's social environment, social activities should be prepared for teachers to develop tolerance towards individuals having different views of life and political thinking. In addition, the desire to recognize people living in their environment is a fundamental need, so a healthy communication should be established in schools. In addition, the need of teachers to meet each other must be conducted in a desirable and transparent manner. Since curiosity is a basic need of people, a communication environment should be prepared in which teachers can learn the issues they are curious about other teachers in the school. The duration breaks may not enough for teachers to socialize. Therefore, extra social activities should be organized for teacher interactions.

Participant teachers expressed the *organizational factors* as the sources of gossips they observed in their schools. These factors are stated as; unexpected promotions and awards, manager changes in the organization, lack of motivation, changes in the structure and functioning of the organization, monotonous working environments, inadequate chance to express thoughts at school, not treating employees equally and fairly, not satisfied with the working environment. It can be understood that the features of organizations may trigger the gossips in schools. Therefore, some negative practices in the organizational environment are the source of gossips among teachers. Tian et al. (2019) found that workplace gossips negatively influence employees' performance. Han (2020b) states that there are many precautions that school administration can use in the management of gossips. In order to eliminate the monotonous working environment in schools a professional promotion system can be conducted. By this system, the teachers will have the need to work hard to get it, which will also enhance the teacher motivation. Similarly, some studies in the literature have revealed that some negative organizational practices lead to gossips. In his research, Doğan (2002) claims that gossips may emerge in an organization that does not have effective organizational communication. In addition, it was found that the problems related to the management and functioning of the organization gave rise to gossip such as the lack of clear and transparent

management strategies (Eşkin-Bacaksız & Yıldırım, 2015). Arabacı, et al. (2012) concluded that in their research on the teachers, the gossip in the educational organizations emerged due to some organizational reasons such as aimlessness and too much free time. In addition, there are some organizational elements such as uncertainty and distrust in organizations that cause gossips. In this case, monotone working environments and unhealthy communication environments that disrupt the morale of teachers and reduce the work efficiency should be eliminated in schools. Teachers should be informed of what is going on at school and the changes made in the institution should be shared with the teachers.

In general, it can be concluded that gossip is a widespread social phenomenon in organizational life. The school administration should organize gossips to achieve its goals in a healthy way. It is very important to detect and identify the factors that contribute to organizational gossips in schools. In this study, the factors that cause the gossips among teachers in schools are identified. According to the teachers, there many individual, social and organizational factors that cause gossips in schools. Among these factors they especially emphasize the individual features as jealousy, envy, unethical behaviors, curiosity, vanity and aimlessness. Accordingly, it can be claimed that identifying and eliminating the individual, social and organizational situations that cause harmful gossips in the school will contribute to the continuation of the positive climate of the school in terms of organization. Therefore, this research recommends the administrators to focus on arrangement of especially individual factors in the management of gossips in schools.

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