Children’s Perception of a Community Center and Their Schools: a Metaphorical Analysis

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Objective

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of children of a community center and their own school through analyzing the metaphors they used to describe them. We also intended to understand whether children’s perceptions of their school and community center are different.

Theoretical Framework

How children spent their time after school has become an important issue because school-aged children spend almost half of their waking hours in voluntary activities outside the school. A lack of adult supervision, a lack of socially acceptable, structured activities, and an aggregation of anti-social peers are some of the conditions that may create risks for children during the hours following school dismissal (Mahoney, Eccles & Larson, 2004). For example an adolescent’s involvement in a great deal of unstructured leisure time that occurs outside the home and in the absence of adult monitoring has been consistently linked to the development of antisocial and criminal behavior (Dishion & McMahon, 1998).

The community and youth centers may serve as an ideal out-of-school context for reaching the young persons who are most in need of a constructive, enriching learning experience outside the school hours. This is especially important in the Turkish context in which subject-centered curriculum is implemented in a formal, authoritarian and rigid school environment (Engin-Demir, 2007) and a lack of parental support at home due to low level of education. A positive atmosphere that fosters motivation for learning, a caring social relationship with peers and adults, belongingness, opportunities for skill building, and appropriate structure have been validated by the process-focused research on organized out-of-school activities (Mahoney, Eccles and Larson, 2004; Rhodes, 2004). This is also true for school-based activities that are as shown by an international study of 41 countries which reported that students’ academic performance is positively associated with their sense of belonging to their school (OECD, 2004).

The attitudinal and affective dimensions and the belief systems of a school or community center constitute its psychosocial environment or climate and influence children’s cognitive social and psychological development (Griffith, 1999). Because values, attitudes, beliefs, and communications are subjective matters, researchers

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primarily rely on participants’ perceptions to measure organizational climate. A growing literature has examined the use of metaphors in examination of a variety of social settings including schools and other learning environments (Cook-Sather, 2003; Engin-Demir, 2007; Wallace, 2001).

Metaphorical thinking involves employing a familiar object or event as a conceptual tool to elucidate features of a more complex phenomenon or situation (Oxford et al., 1996). According to Lakoff and Johnson, (1980) “metaphor is concerned with the transference of meaning from one situation to another and describing one thing in terms of something else” (p.5). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical and, therefore, if we want to understand how someone thinks and experiences life, we need to study his or her metaphors. Therefore, an analysis of metaphors used by school children who participate in out-of-school activities of a community center can provide us with insight in understanding how they interpret their experiences at the center and in their schools.

For this the following two research questions guided the data collection and data analysis processes:

1. Which metaphors, images and analogies do children use when describing a community center?
2. Which metaphors, images and analogies do children use when describing their own school?

The context

The study was conducted in a community center called ‘Education Park’ which is located in a poor neighborhood of the capital Ankara. The center was established to provide a unique, non-formal educational environment for the personal and social development and practical skills enhancement, particularly of vulnerable children and youth between ages 7-16 by Turkish Education Volunteers Foundations (TEGV).

The overall philosophy of the ‘Education Park’ emphasizes that children and youth should be allowed to develop their own interests. Attendance and activity participation at the park is voluntary. Typical activities cover the areas of personal development, social life, language-communication, culture-art and science and technology. The goals of the activities are to help children to learn more about themselves, to have more self-esteem and improve their social skills. If demanded, children are provided with remedial help on their school studies. Activities are organized and implemented by volunteer high school and university students through a mentoring system. In addition to the activities designed for the official education year, the “Summer Activities” started in 1997. “Summer Activities” aimed specifically to improve children’s social skills rather than the academic skills.

Method

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This qualitative study is comprised of an interpretive analysis of children’s perceptions of a community center and their own school through the metaphors they use. Interpretive studies attempt to understand phenomena studied through the meanings that people assign to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). An interpretive design was employed because the research was fundamentally concerned with providing an understanding of out-of-school activities and school experiences through the impressions of the participants. The study used the concept of “metaphor” as a tool of research for examining the meanings that selected children assign to a community center and their own school.

A semi-structured interview technique was used to collect data. Children were asked to choose a metaphor from a list that describes the community center and their school best. They were also asked to explain the reason(s) of choosing that particular metaphor.

A convenience sampling technique was used to select participants. That is, available children at the education park one day in weekend and one day during the week, and children who participated in summer activities were interviewed. Although, the center served all primary school children (between the ages 7 to 14), only 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grade primary school students attending the community center were selected as participants of this study. It was thought that older children might provide more detailed answers for the interview questions. A total of 74 children out of 149 children ages from 10 to 14 participated in the study. 44.6% of them were female while 55.4% of them were male.

Interview notes were compiled and thematic content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used to sort out metaphorical images as well as descriptive statements that were used by children to clarify and explain the metaphors they used. Then, these images were grouped in terms of contextual similarities. Each researcher interpreted the metaphors used by students and identified the themes independently. Then, interpretations and identified themes were compared for the purpose of providing inter-coder-reliability. A high level of agreement was observed on identified themes and interpretations of metaphors.

This study is qualitative and thus reflects the unique perspectives of the individual participants and is not generalizable.

**Findings**

Because of space limitations only general findings will be presented here.

The most frequently used metaphor to describe the community center was family, which is followed by metaphors of school, Amusement park, camp, kindergarten and team. Other metaphors used are as follows: a garden, an anthill, a circus, a forum, an ocean, Olympic Games, a laboratory, a theater, a museum, a horror movie, an artist’s palate, a butterfly, a court, an ocean, a herd, a beehive, and a military camp.
Comparing the community center with family implies that the supervisors are parents, and volunteer activity leaders are older sisters or brothers. Children seem to perceive the community center as a family-like center of caring where there are concerned adults and respectful peers and where their needs are met. Descriptive statements that were used by children to clarify and explain the family metaphor indicated that they are especially satisfied with their good relationships with the supervisors and volunteers.

Interestingly, the second most frequently used metaphor in describing TEGV was the metaphor of school. Although the purpose of the center is to create an environment which is different from disciplined and authoritarian school environment emphasizing rote learning, some of the children still perceive the center as a school. Most of those children emphasized the programmed activities and academic knowledge given at the center in explaining the reasons of choosing the school metaphor.

Although almost all of the metaphors used for TEGV were positive, there were two negative metaphors, a horror movie and a court, chosen by the children for the community center. The reasons of choosing these negative metaphors were to explain the peer pressure in their group. These children specifically mentioned the name of their friends to explain the negative intervention coming from this specific child.

The metaphors such as a Luna park, a camp, a kindergarten, a garden, a butterfly, Olympic Games and a team used by children in describing the center, indicate that, children have positive perceptions of the physical and social environment created by the center. They tend to perceive the center as a playful and joyful place to have fun while learning.

The most frequently chosen metaphor by children in describing their own schools was metaphor of family followed metaphors of team, factory, army, beehive, laboratory and prison respectively. Other metaphors used by children in describing their own schools were: circus, artist’s palate, exhibition, court, forum, camp, Olympic Games, herd, museum, skate, theater, zoo, anthill, horror movie and military camp.

The metaphor of school as a family indicates that children have positive perceptions of their school environment. When the reason of choosing the family metaphor in describing the school was examined, it was observed that children only mentioned their good relationships with peers in their schools. This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted to examine metaphors of school in Turkish context (Balcý, 1999; Engin-Demir, 2007).

Because images presented in metaphors are signs that connote the respondent’s feelings and attitudes towards the phenomenon being explored (Smith, 1998), it can be suggested that almost all of the participants tended to have positive attitudes and feelings toward the community center. They compared TEGV with family, Luna park, camp, kindergarten, team, garden, and butterfly. On the other hand, majority of participants seem to have negative attitudes and feelings towards their own schools. They compared their schools with factory, army, a prison, court, herd, horror movie and military camp. Children
tended to criticize the limited freedom and autonomy and a lack of consideration of individual needs and interests in their schools. Parallel with the results of others studies conducted about perceptions of students on school using metaphors (Engin-Demir, 2007; Gordon & Lahelma, 1996; Lahelma, 2002), the findings of the present study indicated that children’s metaphors describing their school were mostly negative. Interestingly, children of different cultures perceived their schools as boring and compulsory places. The reasons for this could be the national education systems, which have been established to educate citizens on their rights, duties and responsibilities (Lahelma, 2002) in an organized environment with rigid goals, rules and regulations.

Gordon & Lahelma (1996) examined three different layers of the school, the official, the informal, and the physical school. Official school denotes curriculum, textbooks, lesson content and teaching materials. On the other hand the informal school includes interaction among students, interactions between students and teachers. When the negative metaphors chosen for participants of this study school were analyzed closely, it can be concluded that they tended to focus on the official layer of their school. However, when children used positive metaphors for school, they focused on the informal layer in their school such as their good relationship with friends.

On the other hand, when the positive metaphors used for TEGV were analyzed, the official and informal layers of the community center were mentioned. It can be argued that the children were happy with the curriculum, teaching materials, textbooks of the community center, in addition to their positive relationship with their friends. In other words, children were happy with both official and informal sides of the community center.

Overall results indicated that, majority of the participants perceived TEGV as a family-like place of joy, caring, involvement and learning. Based on the findings, it can be argued that the community center is effective in actualizing its goals of providing a supportive non-formal educational environment and emphasizing the individual needs and interest. This could be explained by community center having teaching-learning activities in a more flexible atmosphere. TEGV can adapt its curriculum to changing needs of the children. Working with stakeholders and volunteers closely TEGV has more opportunity to provide teaching-learning materials and change activities accordingly which could be difficult for schools in a centralized national education system. In this sense TEGV has more opportunity to teach real life knowledge and skills in a practical and enjoyable way.

On the other hand, majority of participants perceived their school as an authoritarian place in which they have to obey the rules, while they are studying hard, completing homework and earning grades. They seem to feel a lack of autonomy and freedom in their school.

Implications

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An investigation of children’s metaphors of the community center they attend and their own school revealed how students feel about the center and their school, how they interpret their experiences (e.g. their relationship with peers and adults) and what they think about the role of the center and their school in their life. It is clear that, metaphors can help supervisors and volunteers in the community center make sense of what happens in the center and how children evaluate the activities they engage in.

The findings of this study have implications for the development of effective out-of-school activities in similar community centers. In addition the school administrators and teachers ought to consider ways and means of influencing children’s images of school in a positive manner in order that student’s learning can be enhanced. What the students find desirable would be a school characterized by a flexible and responsive environment that leaves rooms for some autonomy for the students to attain their own goals.
References


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