





# Investigation of the Relationship Between School Principals' Toxic Leadership Behaviors and Teachers' Perceptions of Organizational Gossip

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## ABSTRACT

This research investigated the relationship between school principals' toxic leadership behaviors and teachers' perceptions of organizational gossip using the relational screening model. The sample consisted of 276 teachers selected through a simple random sampling method from public schools in Sakarya province. The Toxic Leadership Scale and Organizational Gossip Perceptions Scale served as data collection tools. Data analysis revealed that teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership and organizational gossip did not statistically differ based on gender or professional seniority. However, perceptions varied according to the school type in which they worked. The study found a positive relationship between teachers' perceptions of school principals' toxic leadership behaviors and levels of organizational gossip. Toxic leadership is a significant predictor of organizational gossip. The findings underscore the need for more research on the relationship between toxic leadership and organizational gossip, emphasizing the importance of reinforcing these results with qualitative studies.

Keywords:

Leadership, toxic leadership, organizational gossip

## 1. Introduction

One of the most crucial elements of organizational success is leadership. The achievement of organizational goals corresponds directly to the effectiveness of leadership. Consequently, leaders aim to maximize their potential by enhancing their followers' motivation and bolstering their organizational commitment. The literature identifies two types of leadership. The first promotes and elevates employee motivation and performance within an organization, while the second diminishes the quality of organizational life. Toxic leadership, categorized in the literature as a form of detrimental leadership, is often referred to as the dark side of leadership (Harris & Jones, 2018; Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). The term "toxic" derives from the Greek word "toxicus", signifying "poison" (Gangel, 2007). In the literature, toxic leadership is defined as a process that deliberately tries to intimidate employees, humiliates them, tries to gain their dignity through threats and marginalized behavior patterns, and the leader acts harshly and violently towards his followers for control purposes to achieve his needs-based goals (Hitchcock, 2015). A toxic leader gradually reveals these practices throughout the leadership period rather than suddenly developing toxic practices in the organization. Winn and Dykes (2019) stated that three main areas push a leader to become a toxic leader, and these areas are ego satisfaction, psychological problems and distrust towards people.

"In the field of educational management, most studies have focused on the positive aspects of leadership, often overlooking its negative sides. This has led to limited research on toxic leadership in educational settings. Essentially, toxic leaders in schools are no different from those in other domains. Blase (2003) provided a

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detailed list of 20 toxic practices performed by school principals. This list is divided into three basic categories based on the level of aggression: a) Level 1 (Indirect, Moderate Aggression) - Ignoring teachers' thoughts, needs, and feelings; not supporting teachers; withholding resources; favoritism, and unprofessional personal behavior. b) Level 2 (Direct, Increased Aggression) - Engaging in espionage, sabotage, destroying teachers' teaching tools, making and criticizing unreasonable demands. c) Level 3 (Direct, Violent Aggression) - Lying, threats, issuing inappropriate written condemnations, giving unfair evaluations, mistreating students, forcing teachers out of their jobs, and engaging in sexual harassment and racism. When viewed comprehensively, the behaviors and practices of toxic leaders have numerous destructive and damaging effects on both the organization and its employees. This toxic atmosphere can permeate throughout the organization, leading to harmful situations that can be described as "poisonous." One notable manifestation of such situations is undoubtedly gossip."

Toxic leadership has devastating consequences for both employees and organizations. Studies have shown that these negative effects include decreased employee well-being, organizational citizenship levels, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and trust (Bell, 2017; Dussault & Frenett, 2015; Zellars et al., 2002). Additionally, research has indicated that toxic leadership results in detrimental outcomes such as increased stress, organizational deviation, anxiety, organizational conflict, cynicism, alienation, and emotional fatigue (Hadadian & Sayadpour, 2018; Killoren, 2014; Xu et al., 2015).

Gossip serves as a term for various informal communications both within society and among employees (Kumar & Gopinadhan, 2009). The literature distinguishes gossip into two types: positive and negative. Positive gossip pertains to socially accepted behaviors and acts as a constructive social sanction. In contrast, negative gossip is linked to socially inappropriate behaviors and serves as a detrimental social sanction (Turner et al., 2003). Four primary characteristics define gossip: a) It establishes new norms for groups. 2) It regulates the behavior of others. 3) It aids in reputation management. 4) It fosters social connections within the group. Within organizations, gossip often involves the spread of unconfirmed beliefs, typically conveyed verbally. Some of these communications also symbolize emotional states. Organizational leaders undoubtedly play a pivotal role in interpreting and managing such exchanges (Akande & Odewale, 1994). It's evident that proficient handling of this role by school principals profoundly impacts all educational processes. Given this backdrop, it becomes pertinent to explore the influence of school principals' toxic leadership behaviors on teachers' perceptions of organizational gossip. It's posited that the toxic behaviors directed towards teachers, central figures in the educational process, could influence their propensity for negative gossip. Existing literature has elucidated the relationship of organizational gossip with facets like organizational citizenship (Xie et al., 2022), social identity (Xie et al., 2019), organizational justice (Khan et al., 2022), organizational self-esteem (Song & Guo, 2022), organizational socialization (Ribarsky & Hammonds, 2019), and authentic leadership (Cheng et al., 2022). However, the gap in studies specifically exploring the impact of toxic leadership behaviors on organizational gossip underscores this research's uniqueness. Drawing on this novelty, this research aims to contribute to the broader field. Within this framework, the study delves into the effects of school principals' toxic leadership behaviors on perceptions of organizational gossip as seen through the lens of teachers. The study seeks answers to the following questions:

- What is the level of teachers' perceptions of school principals' toxic leadership behaviors and do these perceptions differ according to teachers' demographic characteristics (gender, marital status, type of school they work in and professional seniority)?
- What is the level of teachers' perceptions of organizational gossip and do these perceptions differ according to teachers' demographic characteristics (gender, marital status, type of school they work in and professional seniority)?
- What is the relationship between teachers' perceptions of school principals' toxic leadership behaviors and organizational gossip perceptions?
- Do teachers' perceptions of school principals' toxic leadership behaviors and organizational gossip predict their perceptions?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Model

This study aimed to assess teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership exhibited by school principals and their levels of perception organizational gossip. In addition to the main objective, the research also explored whether teachers' opinions varied based on their demographic characteristics, including gender, the type of school they are employed at, and their professional seniority. The study utilized the relational screening model, a subtype of the general relational survey within quantitative research designs. This model seeks to identify the existence, magnitude, and causality of changes between two or more variables (Büyüköztürk et al., 2008). Using the relational survey model, this study discerned the relationship between teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership behaviors by school principals and their levels of perception organizational gossip.

### 2.2. Population and Sample

The research population comprises 5899 teachers working in Sakarya province in the 2022-2023 academic year. The confidence interval was taken as 95% and the sufficient sample size was calculated as 245. The sample of the study consists of 276 teachers working in 22 schools selected from the population by simple random sampling method. The demographic information of the teachers participating in the study is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Distribution of Demographic Characteristics of Teachers*

Features		N	%
Gender	Female	112	40.58
	Male	164	59.42
Marital Status	Single	133	48.18
	Married	143	51.82
Type of School	Secondary School	145	52.54
	High School	131	47.46
Professional Seniority	1-10 years	77	27.90
	11-19 years	88	31.88
	20 years and above	111	40.22

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that 112 (40.58%) of the teachers in the study group are female and 164 (59.42%) are male. 133 of the participants were single (48.18%) and 143 were married (51.82%). 145 (52.54%) of the teachers work in secondary school and 131 (47.46%) in high school. When the professional seniority of the teachers is examined, 77 (27.90%) have a professional seniority of 1-10 years, 88 (31.88%) have a professional seniority of 11-19 years, and 111 (40.22%) have a professional seniority of 20 years or more.

### 2.3. Data Collection Tools

Two separate scales were used to collect the data for the research. These scales are the Toxic Leadership Scale developed by Çelebi et al. (2015) and the Organizational Gossip Scale developed by Han and Dağlı (2018). The validity and reliability parameters of the scales are given below.

*Toxic Leadership Scale:* The Toxic Leadership Scale developed by Çelebi et al. (2015) was used to determine teachers' perceptions of school principals' toxic leadership behaviors. The scale consists of 30 items and has four sub-dimensions (unappreciativeness, utilitarian, egoistic, psychological dysfunction). As a result of the analysis, it was seen that the scale items could explain 67.07% of the total variance. In the 5-point Likert scale, the most positive answer was 5, while the most negative answer was graded with 1 point. As a result of the reliability analysis performed by the researcher, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient was determined as .82.

*Organizational Gossip Scale:* The Organizational Gossip Scale developed by Han and Dağlı (2018) was used to determine teachers' perceptions of organizational gossip. The scale is three-dimensional (informing dimension, developing relationships dimension and organizational harm dimension) and consists of 24 items. As a result of the analysis, it was seen that the scale items could explain 70.19% of the total variance. In the 5-point Likert type of the scale, the most positive answer was 5, while the most negative answer was graded with 1 point. As a result of the reliability analysis performed by the researcher, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient was determined as .82.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

Before the analysis, whether the data set met the normality assumption was checked. Since the skewness and kurtosis values of the data set are between +1.13 and -0.87, it has been observed to provide the assumption of normality (Tabachnick and Fidel, 2003). Because for the data to be normally distributed, skewness and kurtosis values must be  $\pm 2$ . Descriptive statistical calculations were first made in the data set. The arithmetic averages of the teachers were examined to determine their toxic leadership and organizational gossip perception levels. The arithmetic averages range from 1.00 to 1.79 were interpreted as quite low, from 1.80 to 2.59 as low, from 2.60 to 3.39 as medium, from 3.40 to 4.19 as high, and from 4.20 to 5.00 as quite high (Özdamar, 2002). T-tests and one-way analysis of variance, which are appropriate according to the number of groups, were performed for the demographic characteristics of teachers' perceptions. Finally, Pearson correlation analysis was performed to determine the relationship between teachers' toxic leadership and perception of organizational gossip, and then regression analysis was performed to reveal the extent to which toxic leadership predicts organizational gossip perceptions.

### 2.5. Ethical

Necessary approval for the use of scales in the study was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee at İnönü University (Document Number: 24/11/2022 22-06).

### 3. Findings

The study examined whether teachers' perceptions of school principals' toxic leadership behaviors and teachers' perception organizational gossip levels changed according to demographic variables (gender, professional seniority and type of school studied). Findings on teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership and perception of organizational gossip about school principals are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Investigation of Teachers' Toxic Leadership and Organizational Gossip Perception Levels

Size	N	$\bar{X}$	Ss
Toxic Leadership Scale	276	2.05	.85
Organizational Gossip Scale	276	2.79	.65

When Table 2 is examined, it is seen  $\bar{X} = 2.79$  that teachers' toxic leadership perceptions  $\bar{X} = 2.05$  of school principals and teachers' perception of organizational gossip perception levels are. Findings regarding the evaluation of teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership and perception of organizational gossip about school principals according to teachers' gender are given in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Investigation of Teachers' Perceptions of Toxic Leadership and Organizational Gossip

Dimension	Gender	N	$\bar{X}$	Ss	t	df	p
Toxic Leadership Scale	Female	112	2.11	.90	.722	274	.32
	Male	164	2.02	.81			
Organizational Gossip Scale:	Female	112	2.89	.63	.159	274	.02
	Male	164	2.29	.64			

T-test was conducted to examine teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership and perception of organizational gossip according to their gender. Accordingly, when Table 3 was examined, it was concluded that teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership did not differ statistically according to the gender variable [ $t_{(274)} = .722$ ;  $p > .05$ ]. In addition, it was found that teachers' perceptions of organizational gossip differed statistically in favor of female teachers according to the gender variable [ $t_{(274)} = .159$ ;  $p < .05$ ]. Findings regarding the evaluation of teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership and perception of organizational gossip about school principals according to teachers' gender are given in Table 3.

**Table 4.** Investigation of Teachers' Perceptions of Toxic Leadership and Organizational Gossip

Dimension	Marital Status	N	$\bar{X}$	Ss	t	df	p
Toxic Leadership Scale	Single	133	2.25	.75	.801	274	-.01
	Married	143	2.15	.82			
Organizational Gossip Scale	Single	133	2.91	.71	.256	274	.02
	Married	143	2.16	.72			

T-test was conducted to examine teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership and organizational gossip according to gender. Accordingly, when Table 4 was examined, it was concluded that teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership differed statistically in favor of single teachers according to their marital status [ $t_{(274)} = .801$ ;  $p < .05$ ]. In addition, it was found that teachers' perceptions of organizational gossip differed statistically in favor of female teachers according to the gender variable [ $t_{(274)} = .159$ ;  $p < .05$ ].

Findings regarding the evaluation of teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership and perception of organizational gossip about school principals according to teachers' gender are given in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Investigation of Teachers' Perceptions of Toxic Leadership and Organizational Gossip

Dimension	Professional Seniority	N	$\bar{X}$	Ss	Yes.K.	k t•	F	p
Toxic Leadership Scale	1-10 years	77	2.11	.79	Between group	.091	.180	.83
	11-19 years	88	2.12	.82				
	20 years and above	111	2.13	.69	In group	189.09		
	Total				Total	190.19		
Organizational Gossip Scale:	1-10 years	77	2.69	.63	Between group	.490	1.19	.49
	11-19 years	88	2.68	.60				
	20 years and above	111	2.76	.62	In group	71.111		
	Total				Total	71.701		

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to examine teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership and perception of organizational gossip according to their professional seniority. Accordingly, when Table 5 was examined, it was seen that teachers' toxic leadership perceptions did not differ statistically according to their professional seniority [ $F_{(2, 273)} = .180$ ;  $p > .05$ ]. In addition, it was concluded that teachers' perceptions of organizational gossip did not differ statistically according to their professional seniority [ $F_{(2, 273)} = 1.19$ ;  $p > .05$ ].

Findings regarding the evaluation of teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership and perception of organizational gossip according to the type of school where teachers work are given in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Investigation of Teachers' Perceptions of Toxic Leadership and Organizational Gossip According to the Type of School Where Teachers Work

Dimension	Employed School Type	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	t	df	p
Toxic Leadership Scale	Secondary School	145	1.92	.89	-2.11	274	-.01
	High School	131	2.35	.79			
Organizational Gossip Scale:	Secondary School	145	2.72	.52	-2.31	274	.03
	High School	131	2.93	.53			

A T-test was conducted to examine teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership and perception of organizational gossip according to gender. Accordingly, when Table 6 was examined, it was concluded that teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership differed statistically according to the type of school they worked at [ $t_{(274)} = -2.11$ ;  $p < .05$ ]. Accordingly, it can be said that teachers working in high schools have higher perceptions of toxic leadership compared to teachers working in secondary schools.

In addition, a t-test was performed to determine whether teachers' perceptions of organizational gossip differed, and it was concluded that teachers' perceptions of organizational gossip differed statistically according to the type of school they worked at [ $t_{(274)} = -2.31$ ;  $p < .05$ ]. Accordingly, it can be said that teachers working in high schools have higher perceptions of organizational gossip than secondary school teachers.

The results obtained by testing the relationship between teachers' toxic leadership perceptions and organizational gossip perceptions with Pearson Product Moments Correlation Coefficient are shown in Table

**Table 7.** Correlation Analysis Results to Determine the Relationship Between Teachers' Toxic Leadership Perceptions and Organizational Gossip Perceptions

	Organizational Gossip	Toxic Leadership Scale
Organizational Gossip Scale:	<i>r</i>	1
Toxic Leadership Scale	<i>r</i>	.701

\*\* Significant at  $p < .01$  level

As a result of the correlation analysis conducted to investigate the relationship between teachers' toxic leadership perceptions and perception of organizational gossip, as seen in Table 7, it was concluded that there was a statistically positive relationship at different levels between teachers' toxic leadership perceptions and organizational gossip perceptions ( $r = .701$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Regression analysis was performed to test whether teachers' toxic leadership perceptions predicted organizational gossip perceptions, and the results are shown in Table 8.

**Table 8.** Regression Analysis of Teachers' Toxic Leadership Perceptions to Predict Organizational Gossip Perceptions

Variable	B	SHb***	$\beta$	t	p
Fixed	2.286	.069	-	32.376	.000
Toxic Leadership	.177	.060	.311	5.625	.000
	R = .701		R <sup>2</sup> = .491		
	F= 29.770		p = .00		

The regression values between teachers' toxic leadership perception (predictor) and organizational gossip perception (predictor) are shown in Table 8. Accordingly, it was determined that there was a statistically moderate positive relationship ( $r = .311$ ) between teachers' toxic leadership perception and organizational gossip perception. Based on this finding, it can be stated that teachers' toxic leadership perceptions explain 5% of the total variance of their organizational gossip perceptions.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership behaviors and the organizational gossip perception levels of the school principals with whom they work. Specifically, we examined the toxic leadership behavior levels exhibited by school principals and the overarching organizational gossip levels among teachers. Further, we assessed if these variables showed any variance based on factors such as gender, marital status, professional seniority, and the type of school in which they were employed. Additionally, we explored any potential relationship between these two main variables. The ensuing discussion elucidates the research results.

The findings revealed that teachers perceive the toxic leadership behaviors of school principals at a moderate level. This suggests that during school administration, principals can occasionally display toxic behaviors. Contrarily, literature indicates studies where teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership were found to be low (Bahadır & Kahveci, 2020; Çetinkaya & Ordu, 2017; Kesgin et al., 2023), and some where perceptions were high (Schmidt, 2014). Such varied findings could be indicative of school principals manifesting toxic leadership behaviors more frequently in certain schools than others. The prevailing school culture has also been postulated in literature as a potential influence on the manifestation of these behaviors. Our research found no significant difference in teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership based on gender, corroborated by other studies (Dobbs & Do, 2019; Dobbs, 2014, Çetinkaya, 2017). In contrast, Demirel (2015) and İlhan (2019) posited that female teachers perceive school administrators as exhibiting more toxic leadership traits than their male counterparts. Another notable observation was that single teachers possess a heightened perception of toxic leadership compared to their married counterparts. This finding parallels those of Chua and Murray (2015), Demirel (2015), and Hitchcock (2015), where female participants' perceptions outstripped those of male participants. In opposition, studies by Çetinkaya & Ordu (2018) and Özer et al. (2017) observed no perceptual differences based on marital status. The research also determined that teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership were not influenced by their professional seniority. Eriş (2019) and Demirel (2015) drew similar conclusions. However, a study by Özer et al. (2017) noted that participants with 5-15 years of professional seniority exhibited higher perceptions than other groups. Another key finding was the statistically significant variation in perceptions based on the type of school: teachers in high schools held stronger perceptions of toxic leadership than those in secondary schools. This could be attributed to the more functional operational systems in high schools, leading to clearer employee expectations. Contradicting this observation, İlhan (2019) found that secondary school teachers perceived school principals as more toxic than those in high schools.

According to the analysis, it was deduced that teachers' perceptions of organizational gossip were moderate. This result suggests that gossip exists in the school environment, albeit to a limited extent. Corroborating this, several studies in the literature indicate that teachers' perceptions of organizational gossip are also moderate (Karasu, 2020; Petek, 2021; Şafak, 2021). However, Sevda (2021) and Çağalı (2021) found teachers' perceptions

to be low. A gender-based discrepancy was observed in the organizational gossip perception levels of the participants, with female teachers showing a higher inclination. This is consistent with the findings from Karasu (2020). In contrast, Gürbüz (2019) determined that men perceived organizational gossip more than women did. Contradicting both these trends, multiple studies found no significant gender-based differences in perceptions of organizational gossip (Alakaşlı, 2021; Aydın, 2021; Çağalı, 2021; Han, 2019; Şafak, 2021, Tekgöz, 2013). Another notable result indicated that single teachers perceived organisational gossip more than their married counterparts. However, studies by Gürbüzöğlü (2019) and Han (2019) found no marital status-based variations in these perceptions. Furthermore, the research revealed no significant difference in perceptions of organizational gossip based on professional seniority. This aligns with findings from Gürbüz (2019) and Özşarлак (2016). Yet, Han (2019) reported that teachers with less professional seniority had a stronger perception than their more senior counterparts. Regarding school type, it was discerned that high school teachers had stronger perceptions than those in secondary schools. Contrasting this, Alakaşlı (2021), Petek (2021), and Sevda (2021) concluded that the school in which teachers were employed did not influence their perceptions.

The study investigated the relationship between toxic leadership and organizational gossip. The findings revealed a significant and positive correlation between teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership and their perceptions of organizational gossip. Regression analysis further highlighted moderate and positively significant relationships between teachers' perceptions of toxic leadership behaviors and their perceptions of organizational gossip. Based on these results, it can be inferred that the presence of a toxic leader tends to elevate gossip levels, as toxic leadership styles significantly predict organizational gossip. No existing literature directly explores the relationship between perceptions of toxic leadership and organizational gossip. Nonetheless, given the negative implications of toxic leadership, there are studies suggesting that such leadership behaviors can foster negative attitudes and behaviors, such as organizational silence (Demirtaş & Küçük, 2019), burnout (Uzunbacak et al., 2019), and alienation (Ertekin et al., 2019). From this perspective, the detrimental aspects of toxic leadership behaviors might amplify teachers' engagement in organizational gossip. Considering the findings, it is advisable to enhance social support in schools and curtail toxic leadership behaviors. By doing so, the prevalence of organizational gossip among teachers could decrease, potentially leading to improved job performance. However, it's important to note that current literature lacks investigations into the relationship between teachers' perceptions of school principals' toxic leadership behaviors and organizational gossip levels. Therefore, more research is required to delineate this relationship. The results emphasize that adopting constructive and supportive approaches in school leadership can mitigate psychological issues. Concurrently, further studies are needed to ascertain measures that promote positive thinking among teachers and ways to enhance their workplace happiness. To achieve a comprehensive understanding, it is recommended to carry out detailed studies exploring teachers' perspectives on toxic leadership and their levels of engagement in organizational gossip, and to replicate the research with diverse samples.

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