Emotion Management in Preschool Employee-Motivation Processes

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Abstract

The study focuses on the preschool, a specific case of a small organization that includes a small staff and a unique labor–management dynamic. The preschool staff comprises one teacher and two permanent staff members: an aide and a fill-in teacher. The study tracks the methods that teachers use to motivate staff members to do their jobs effectively in view of their considerations in choosing these methods and the way staff members perceive them. The underlying assumption is that, due to the teacher’s specific professional context, factors and motivational methods other than those found in research on organizational staff motivation methods may come to light.

The study is based on a multiple case study that focuses on ten cases (preschool staffs comprised of a teacher, a teacher’s aide, and a fill-in teacher), each treated via interviews, observations, and document analysis. Four main motivational methods are found, all interrelated and each accommodating various strategies that the teacher uses to motivate staff members to do their jobs well: interpersonal and professional outreach, partnering, professional empowerment, and appreciation of job performance. The analysis and the discussion indicate that the emotional dimension generally, and the expression and management of emotions particularly, run like a crimson thread through the motivation processes that teachers set in motion. Accordingly, the article emphasizes the way teachers tend to express or repress their emotions toward their aides and fill-ins in the broader frame of the process of motivating them to work effectively.

The study contributes by probing the ways in which emotion management is used to motivate preschool staff. Theoretical and applied conclusions of the study appear the end of the article.

Preface

“Why do people do what they do?” This question has been a focal point of curiosity and interest among many researchers in psychology and sociology who study the motives of personal and professional behavior and focus on motivation as one of the most important factors in individuals’ conduct and a sine qua non in designing employee–organization relations (Giancola, 2010). Against this backdrop, motivation theories have sorted themselves into two groups: needs theories, which relate to precipitants of workplace motivation (Herzberg, 1968; 2003; Maslow, 1943; Maslow, Frager & Cox, 1970) and process theories, focusing on the way motivation is constructed (Seo & Ilies, 2009; Vroom, 1994).

Ever since the dawn of “organizational behavior,” workplace motivation has been researched in reference to organizational management within the wider construct of a field called “employee motivation.” This discipline concerns itself with identifying the factors that drive and influence workers’ behavior; its purpose is to predict the extent of employees’ willingness to invest effort and to find ways to enhance their motivation on the job (Hur, 2017; Kaspi-Baruch, 2016; Lazaroiu, 2015; Sarangi & Shah, 2015).

Even though research on employee motivation spans various kinds of organizations, preschools have not yet attracted attention in the context of this aspect of the manager–subordinate relationship. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to detect specific tactics that teachers use to motivate staff members to do their jobs effectively, examine the considerations that underlie their decisions, as managers, to choose certain motivational methods, and investigate the way their subordinate staff members perceive the tactics in question.

The underlying assumption of the study is that the specific characteristics of the preschool as an organizational setting create a professional context specific to the preschool teacher and may reveal motivational factors and tactics that diverge from those found in research on employee motivation in other organizations. Specifically, the study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) What methods do teachers use to motivate staff members to do their jobs effectively? (2) What considerations underlie teachers’ decisions to invoke various motivational methods? (3) How do staff members perceive teachers’ motivational tactics? By answering these questions, we will broaden the swath of research to include employee motivation in a small organization with few staff members whose purpose is early-childhood education. We will also contribute to what is known about the work of the teacher as a staff motivator.

A review of the literature on employee motivation in organizations shows that the methods used to motivate people to do their jobs effectively address themselves to (1) the organization’s intention of creating an optimal organizational climate that cultivates positive feelings, such as belonging, personal and professional security, and protectiveness (Wallace, Butts, Johnson, Stevens, & Smith, 2016), (2) designing the job from a motivational orientation that assumes that when the on-the-job activity itself induces feelings of satisfaction, capacity, recognition, advancement, and personal growth, job performance and the job itself generate internal motivation and effective performance (Güntert, 2015), and (3) the organizational system of rewards that relate to the characteristics of the job and employees’ performance relative to their job definition (Stanca, Bruni & Corazzini, 2009).

The analysis of the findings of this study underscores the powerful presence of emotions and emotion management in teachers’ motivational tactics. This article centers specifically on the findings that pertain to the emotional aspect of motivating preschool staff.

Literature review

Employee motivation

In its attention to the factors that power and influence employees’ behavior, research on employee motivation singles out the connection among managers’ motivational tactics, the quality of work, and the organization’s success and efficiency (Delfgaauw & Dur, 2007). To predict the extent of employees’ willingness to invest effort in doing their jobs and to whet their motivation, two motivational paradigms are invoked. One focuses on the employee; its purpose is to identify the factors that drive and influence his or her behavior in relation to output and efficiency on the job. The second stems from the aspect of organizational management, focusing on ways and means that organizations use to motivate their employees (Hur, 2017; Sarangi & Shah, 2015; Shahid & Azhar, 2013). Turning its attention to the latter paradigm, this study focuses on preschool teachers’ motivational tactics and examines their effect on the sense of job satisfaction and, by extension, willingness to invest effort and perseverance in doing the job.

The research on employee motivation in organizations reveals a wide spectrum of tactics that have been found effective in encouraging internal motivation, associated positively with high work output and efficiency. One may funnel these tactics and strategies into three main aspects that have been found to influence employee motivation: organization climate, design of job characteristics, and system of rewards.

The organization climate that emerges from interaction between the organization and its employees affects employees’ feelings and, in turn, their job motivation. A positive working climate responds to staff members’ internal needs that relate to feelings of belonging, value, and personal security—which, in turn, stimulate motivation to do the job effectively (Cummings & Worley, 2014). When job characteristics are designed with the intent to motivate, it is presumed that when this effort results in enhanced meaning, satisfaction, development, and personal growth, the very act of doing the job becomes a source of internal motivation to do it effectively (Cherian & Jacob, 2013). The perceived value of rewards has a decisive impact on the sense of fairness and, by extension, the level of employee motivation (Lepper & Green, 2015).

Much like organizational research, research about teacher motivation deals with the precipitants of enhanced functioning and shows that the basic factors associated with organizational climate, job characteristics, and system of rewards are also positively related to teachers’ motivation to engage in positive endeavor in school (Collie, Shapka & Perry, 2012). In addition, where the organizational climate is concerned, school principals motivate teachers to do their jobs more effectively by engaging in positive interaction, giving personal attention, showing consideration and appreciation, treating teachers as partners in making decisions, promoting teachers’ professional development, orienting the job to the gratification of internal needs, and encouraging a sense of optimization (Collie, et al., 2012; Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, Peetsma & Geijsel, 2011; Wallgren, 2011).

Where job design is concerned, it is found that principals motivate teachers to positive performance by designing their jobs as a source of inner needs gratification by co-opting them into job design and setting objectives, adjusting the job to the teacher’s training, setting high, challenging, and meaningful expectations, delegating authority and giving teachers the autonomy to exercise it, providing feedback, and expressing appreciation (Malik, Chugtai, Iqbal Rizwan, 2013; Van den Berghe, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Aelterman, Cardon & Tallir, 2013).

In the field of reward system management, conversely, it is found that positive motivation originates largely in specific internal rewards. In this context, teachers are motivated by satisfying the need to contribute to the development of the future generation (Yuan, Le, McCaffrey, Marsh, Hamilton, Stecher & Springer, 2013) and having a sense of mission and professional commitment (Oplatka, 2010). It is also found that financial rewards are not principal motivators for teachers and that factors related to the structure of the job and resources are available to the teacher and colleagues figure more importantly (Gokce, 2010; Wu, 2012).

Emotions in teaching

Research on emotions in teaching focuses on identifying the emotions of teachers and principals in various work situations in relation to teachers’ interaction with superiors, peers, pupils, and parents; emotion management in teaching; and the effects of teachers’ emotions on what takes place in their work and on their pupils. Several variables prove to be associated with emotions that teachers evince as they cope with reforms, evaluation processes, pupils’ behavior, relations with parents, professional identity, stages of career, and the quality of stewarding and professional support that they receive (Day & Lee, 2011; Hargreaves, 2000; Kelchtermans, 2011; Meyer, 2009; Oplatka & Eizenberg, 2007).

The research shows that teachers’ emotions become stronger at times of change and reforms that affect their thinking processes and influence their perspective on the value of the change being made (Zembylas, Charalambous, Charalambous & Kendeou, 2011). Furthermore, teachers have an emotional influence on their peers; thus, their anxiety and insecurity thwart the willingness of other staff members to experiment and tilt their attitudes toward opposing change, resulting in pressure, stress, and worry among peers (Saunders, 2013).

An important focal point in research on teachers’ emotions relates to concern and caring, including the formation of meaningful relations, the ability to maintain relations with others, and a commitment to responding to others sensitively and flexibly (Noddings, 1992). Caring among teachers is manifested in personal conversation, follow-up and support of pupils and parents (O’Connor, 2008), and lavish investment in at-risk pupils, voluntarily and on their own time (Oplatka, 2012). Another concept discussed in emotion research is emotion regulation/management, defined as something that people do that determines which emotions they will express or repress, when, and in what way (Gross, 2013). It is found that teachers regulate emotions both via cognitive assessment of situations through reinterpreting events and by repressing and concealing emotions in order to avoid adverse outcomes (Tsouloupas et al., 2010). The assumption is that the teaching profession is typified by intensity in the expression and management of emotions, foremost in teacher–pupil contacts, and that teachers are affected by emotional rules specific to the school ecosystem (Hargreaves, 1998; Nias, 1989; Oplatka, 2004).

Studies on forms of emotion management among teachers in various countries have generated much knowledge about the relation between emotion management and various aspects of teaching, such as coping with changes (Hargreaves, 1994, 2000), the connection between teachers’ emotions and their pedagogical beliefs (Zembylas, 2005), coping with and expressing emotions associated with pupil behavior (Oplatka, 2004; Sutton, 2002), and dealing with frustration, distress, or disappointment in interaction with children’s parents, as reported by preschool teachers in Israel (Oplatka & Eizenberg, 2007).

Important factors that influence the methods of emotion management in teaching include the ideological and cultural fundaments of the teaching profession, the existence of emotional beliefs and rules that define the specific professional culture in school, and, foremost, social expectations of teacher, which are influenced by teachers’ gender, the structure and climate of the school, seniority, and the principal’s leadership (Nias, 1999; Stephanou, 2013). In primary and pre-primary education, for example, the teaching culture promotes concern for the pupil, caring, and expression of positive emotions in class, leading to strong senses of commitment, professional compulsion, and responsibility toward young children—encouraging teachers to display immense concern for them and reflecting their perception of their role as teachers. This teaching culture, which promotes several forms of emotional expression, is associated with the surrogate-parent image that is attributed to teachers and with the broad definition of the teaching profession (Prosser, 1999). Additionally, given the feminization of the school principal’s role in many Western countries, women are portrayed as having characteristics suited to enabling children to grow and being concerned about the development of their selfhood (Ross-Smith et al., 2007).

The extent of teachers’ control over the expression of their emotions may vary in the course of their careers (Sutton, 2002). Seniority has been found to be a factor of influence on teachers’ emotions (Stephanou, 2013). New teachers tend to be energetic, enthusiastic, and emotionally intense, whereas those approaching retirement find their reserves of energy dwindling (Hargreaves, 2005).

The principal’s role in managing teachers’ emotions has also attracted attention in research. Israeli teachers believe that the positive expression of emotions by the principal toward them, along with attentiveness to and consideration of their own emotions, abet similar emotion management among teachers because the affective bond thus created between the principal and the teachers is transferred from teachers to their pupils in class (Oplatka, 2007). Studies show a connection between the principal’s leadership and emotion management in teaching, in the main, and the extent of teachers’ professionalism, organizational commitment, and self-capacity (Rizvi, 2008).

Berkowitz & Eyal (2014) find that a strong tendency among principals to behaviors that focus on interpersonal relations, including support and advancement, promotes a culture of concern in schools and favorably affects subordinates’ emotions, enhances teachers’ job enthusiasm, and attenuates their professional fears. Conversely, behaviors not oriented to relations with others, such as inattention to subordinates’ emotional needs at times of organizational change, are associated with high levels of emotional alienation among teachers.

The studies reviewed above indicate that emotions play an important role in the world of teachers and principals and that emotion management has a powerful effect on peers, subordinates, pupils, and everyone who visits the school (Oplatka, 2007).

The preschool as an organizational setting

A preschool is a unique organizational setting that affords a test case of small organizations and has small-staff characteristics that create unique conditions for study of dynamics between labor and management and among employees (Josefy, Kuban, Ireland, & Hitt, 2015). These uniquenesses pertain to the staff members’ job definitions—teacher, teacher’s aide, and fill-in teacher—and working methods. Thus, a preschool teacher is responsible for running her facility as an administratively and pedagogically independent unit. From the educational standpoint, she is responsible as a principal and a teacher for creating an optimal educational and scholastic environment. Organizationally, she is in charge of staff performance and of using the preschool’s resources in coordination with professionals, her support system, parents, and the community. She also faces the organizationally unique challenge of being responsible for the functioning of members of a staff of which she is an integral member (Oplatka & Studni, 2011).

The teacher’s aide works alongside the teacher or the fill-in teacher in a state of double subordination: professionally to the teacher and administratively to the superintendent and the municipal authority (Firsteter, 2015). Recently, her job has expanded beyond technical and caregiving duties that focus on maintaining the preschool and preparing it for its didactic activity; today it also includes pedagogical duties and group and individualized work with children (Kimchi, 2012). Even though the aide is the teacher’s predominant associate, a professional distance exists between her and the teacher and her job definition is vague in a way that makes the teacher’s authority difficult to exercise (Oplatka & Studni, 2011; Oplatka, & Eizenberg, 2007).

The role of the “fill-in teacher” is specific to preschools in Israel. It was created when teachers’ posts were reduced from six days per week to five, making it necessary to replace them on their day off. The fill-in teacher works in several preschools during the week. Research in Israel shows that teachers and fill-in teachers find it difficult to maintain ongoing professional consultation because they do not share work time. Furthermore, the human surroundings of the preschool, including staff, parents, and the community, see the fill-in teacher as a “substitute” and not as a meaningful member of the staff (Firsteter, 2015; Maskit, & Firstater, 2016; Oplatka & Stundi, 2011).

Thus, the preschool is an organizational setting that has unique characteristics that include a small organizational structure comprised of one teacher and two permanent staff members. The teacher has the contrasting job characteristics of being at once a manager and a partner. Her managerial and functional boundaries are not clear. Her managerial role is perceived, by her and by professionals, as semantic only, making it hard for her to exercise her executive powers. Furthermore, preschool teachers lack the authority to reward staff members by offering external incentives. Also, they find it hard to maintain sound professional consulting due to the professional gap between them and their aides and because their communication with fill-in teachers is indirect.

Methodology

Since employee motivation includes interactive variables, the qualitative paradigm was chosen for the gathering and analysis of data about the phenomenon studied in the context in which it takes place, arising from the respondents’ perception and interpretation of their experiences (Stake, 2013). The research matrix is a multiple-case study, in which the gathering of processive data from multiple sources creates a rich database that serves as a background for understanding of the phenomenon being researched, its essence, and its meaning (Yin, 2009). In the research presented, the unit of analysis is the preschool, i.e., the case.

The cases and their selection

To reinforce the validity of the findings and prevent randomness, the cases were selected by deliberate typical case sampling in order to create a homogeneous group that is highly likely to represent the characteristics of the phenomenon (Stake, 2013). For this purpose, Author 1 asked the inspectors of preschools to help identify preschools that meet the chosen criteria and would be willing to take part in the study. After all teachers and staff members were approached, eleven preschools were chosen that satisfied the following criteria: (1) the teacher had ten to twenty years’ seniority, i.e., were in their “professional adulthood” (Oplatka & Aizenberg, 2007), a stage typified by a well-formed perception of role, proficiency in working skills, and ability to create harmony among the components of the job (Hall, 2002; Watzke, 2007); (2) the members of the preschool staff had worked together for least four years, i.e., reached the “staff formation” stage after concretizing their goals, duties, relations, and working norms (Waite, Coates & Veliquette, 2010); (3) the staff had carried out changes under a local-government reform of the structure of preschool teaching and learning, for which the teacher was responsible.

To cover the many and diverse aspects of each specific case that emphasized its uniqueness, only cases among preschools in the State (non-religious) system were chosen. To shed light on these cases and examine them in their specific context, however, they were chosen from four administrative districts.

Research tools

A case study is inclusive, holistic, and based on copious data from diverse sources (Atchan, Davis & Foureur, 2016). Accordingly, semi-structured interviews, non-participatory observations, and analysis of documents were used in the study. Interviews were held with each participant (teacher, aide, and fill-in teacher), focusing on the goals and questions of the study and tailored to each participant’s role on the staff. The interviews took place in a natural environment where the participants were comfortable (Yin, 2009) and were able to reference the phenomenon freely, on the basis of a briefing that set the topic and goals of the study within a systematic frame (Denzin, 2006).

In each “case,” a staff meeting was observed in order to gather data about the participants’ behavior in their natural surroundings and to detect processes and behaviors associated with employee-motivation tactics. To yield authentic data and obtain a broad and clear picture of the phenomenon, focal points of observation were predetermined and systematic and detailed viewing records were kept in the course of the observation. Shortly after the observation, a written summary and impression of the findings was produced because “natural documents” from the research field may be helpful in understanding the phenomenon being researched (Silverman, 2011) and because many such documents yield real-time data. Scanty use was made of documents based on evaluation letters, parent communication notebooks, and electronic-mail and text correspondence between preschool teachers and other staff members.

Procedure

A “multiple case study” is the collective iteration of a “case study.” It presents a summarizing analysis of each individual case and subjects the cases to a comparative cross-case analysis in order to elicit a rich description of the phenomenon and its characteristics (Yin, 2009). Thus, the first stage of the research comprised exploratory research including the analysis of one case in order to test the focus, design, and progression of the study and identify initial categories of the teacher’s motivational tactics. In the second stage, three cases were analyzed, leading to the identification and detection of additional categories that were compared with the findings of the exploratory research. Farther on, data emerging from the remaining cases were collected and analyzed in a process guided by the outcomes and results of the earlier analysis in order to design the final set of categories that correspond to the goal of the study.

The data were systematically analyzed shortly after they were gathered in order to create a foundation of recurring concepts and then to name them, profile them, and lend meaning and interpretation to the data in order to explain the phenomenon investigated by their means. The analysis took place on the basis of Marshall and Rossman’s (2006) four-stage scheme: organizing the data, producing categories, testing hypotheses, and searching for alternative explanations. The coding accorded with Glaser and Strauss’ (2009) principles of comparative analysis, in which a dialogue took place between the data in each “case” and its comparison with the other cases in order to generalize the employee-motivation tactics that were used in the preschool. Finally, the categories derived from the data were compared with the foregoing literature review and new literature in order to establish a new theoretical conceptualization with which to describe the motivational tactics used in the preschool and anchor it in the findings and in theory (Stake, 2013). In the course of the analysis, the two authors spoke with each other and discussed alternative explanations for the categories identified, Author 2 serving as a “critical peer” who challenged the narrative line that was found in order to validate and reinforce the findings.

Several measures were taken to surmount ethical dilemmas: obtaining the respondents’ willing consent to participate in the study, presenting them with relevant information about the study and its course, affirming that the data would be used for research purposes only, preserving anonymity, allowing participants to determine where the interviews would be held, and choosing participants with whom the authors have no employee relations so that they might feel free to speak out (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In the interviews, observations, and data analysis, the authors’ professional knowledge in the field of early childhood was not put to use.

The relationship that was created with the participants was based on an ethic of alliance, mutual respect, trust, commitment, and the authors’ responsibility to the participants (May, 1980). To establish a comfortable discursive atmosphere for the interviews, Author 1 stressed at an early stage, as the participants were being recruited, that she had once been a preschool teacher. When the findings were analyzed, an effort was made to understand the voices that emerged from the interviews in their specific context (Shkedi, 2003), without relying on personal familiarity with the preschool setting. The findings of this analysis follow.

Findings

The emotional dimension of the teachers’ motivation of employees emerged conspicuously in the data analysis. One of the main insights from the research was that teachers integrate the expression and repression of emotions into the motivational strategies that they invoke toward their staff.

The teachers revealed their attitude toward emotion management in the motivation process as part of the description of the labor–relations system. Their descriptions include the expressing of positive emotions to give support in personal situations, mobilize staff members for processes of change, create empowerment, and express appreciation— and the repression of negative emotions in order to spare the motivation process from impairment.

**Expressing positive emotions in order to motivate preschool staff members to work effectively:** Realizing that a positive preschool climate is essential for optimal management of the preschool as a meaningful educational setting, the teachers cultivate close relations as an infrastructure for staff motivation. They do this by means of close interaction in which they express positive emotions such as empathy, caring, and concern. The salutary effect of this practice on staff members motivates staff to do their jobs effectively. Galia, one of the teachers, describes her relations with the staff and explains her decision to encourage feelings of belonging and satisfaction as a motivational tactic:

Preschool work is very complex, terribly fraught—but it has to take place anyway. Therefore, as a teacher, I consider it very important to show empathy, to be there where it’s hard and where it’s easier, too. ... It’s important for me that the staff be satisfied ... that they feel that I care! ... We’re together when it’s hard and when it’s easy, when it’s happy when it’s sad. That we know what each of us came with today helps us to recognize, to understand, to bear in mind, to self-organize, and to make the preschool work as it should.

Describing their motivational tactics, teachers insert metaphors from the home and family milieu. One teacher, for example, calls her preschool “a shared home” and describes how she deliberately gives her aide the sense of belonging as a “housemother” in order to motivate her to bring a sense of commitment to the preschool to her work:

Interviewer: You’re describing top-notch functioning, a very pleasant climate. How does it happen?

Tsipi: It doesn’t happen by itself—I work on it. It’s important for me that she feel good and comfortable in our shared home. ... I give her a good feeling; the children love her. She gives the preschool everything she’s got because she feels at home! She’s a “housemother!”

The expression of positive emotions to staff members is also manifested in gestures that create a sense of belonging and cohesiveness for the purpose of motivating the staff to function effectively, as the teacher Yael demonstrates:

There’s a connection among us. I bring myself, first of all—as a person! ... In this role, you have to come from your personal human place, not from [job] descriptions. ... It gives the work a personal aspect, a pleasant bonding aspect, and that’s important. ... For example, I write down important dates: their birthdays, those of the fill-in teacher’s children. ... I call up to congratulate, give attention, send a flower, say a blessing. ... It creates a climate of together, and together we can go far.

Some of the teachers also note that expressing gratitude and appreciation for job performance is a way to inculcate a sense of value and capacity that make staff members feel more committed to the effective and devoted performance of their work:

I look for opportunities to complement the staff, give encouragement, and make them feel that they contribute and are meaningful. It’s my “working tool” as a teacher. I root for them, make them excellent [laughs], enthuse in the presence of children and parents, and empower them. ... My aide literally waits for me to thank her and tell her that I appreciate her—it recharges her fuel cells! ...

Accordingly, teachers express positive emotions to staff members because they see close interaction as a condition for the creation of an optimal working environment that nurtures feelings of belonging, capacity, and satisfaction—a factor that affects staff members’ motivation and professional commitment.

Repressing negative emotions in order to protect the motivational process

The teachers soft-pedal their managerial position. One of the most conspicuous conflicts that arise in their remarks occurs when they have to deal with a staff member’s aberrant behavior or vacillate about whether to exercise their managerial authority. The teachers relate to their professional responsibility and the duty of defending the boundaries of their role. Contrastingly, they emphasize the difficulty that they face in taking action on this basis and explain their decision to repress their inner need to invoke the power invested in them and motivate staff to perform effectively as would a colleague. Thus, Ruhama, a teacher who has worked with the same aide for seventeen years, describes how she represses the discomfort and difficulty that she feels in exercising her executive prerogatives:

I feel ill at ease when I approach things from the direction of my role as the teacher, top-down, like a “boss.” ... Yes, I have a job to do and a responsibility, [but] it’s not right for me to use this power. Even if I know that I have it and that it might make processes move faster, I don’t like to use it. I let it go deliberately, even if it’s very hard for me. I talk as though I’m on the same level; I approach things from my personal [position] ... from my emotion. ... It takes a lot out of me! Even without putting on “managerial airs” ...

In the unique organizational matrix of the preschool, the managerial aspect is perceived as creating a sense of distance and condescension that emphasizes the hierarchy among staff members and may impair staff motivation. Therefore, the teachers tend to repress the need to act managerially and instead seek the same outcome as a colleague would. Zahava, a veteran teacher, describes this:

Sometimes I don’t have a choice. I have to make sure the preschool functions and then I put that managerial thing aside—it mustn’t be up front; sometimes it’s better for me to stay in the backstage even if it doesn’t give me the best feeling. Wearing a “crown” just isn’t a good fit for preschool work. ... In fact, I have a status that I can’t always express. There’s no place here for bossy affectations.

Orit describes the way she represses the anger and frustration that beset her when her aide oversteps the limits of her job. Aware that the aide’s intentions are good and loath to impair her motivation, she weighs her remarks and repeats her orders as would an equal, a colleague:

Interviewer: I’m talking about equality and authority. In practice, does it work?

Orit: So-so. Not always. ... For example, I worked together with parents to put together a program to shape their daughter’s behavior. The next day, I got an angry phone call from the parents. It turned out that my aide told them that their daughter had erupted and gave them an “education.” ... The parents were insulted and this whole unnecessary drama broke out.

Interviewer: You’ve got authority. You could have told her that it’s none of her business.

Orit: Yes, but ... I’m very careful. ... I don’t want to belittle her, to hurt her motivation.

Interviewer: Are you afraid ...?

Orit: Not of her. Of the implications. It’s unbecoming of me to put her in her place because it already happened. I talked with her but only after I weighed every word ....

The specific professional context of the preschool teacher is typified, among other things, by spending long periods of time in the sole company of the aide—every day, four or five days per week—and by being the manager of the fill-in teacher, whom she never encounters at work. To deal with this administrative complexity, the teacher uses unique motivational tactics that she tailors to the various situations in order to maintain the delicate web of relations and stability in the staff’s work.

Preschool work requires both staff members to be intensively and actively accessible and available all day long. In the interviews with the teachers, it was found that, due to the close relationship among staff, aides are sometimes unavailable on the job for various reasons. Although such situations make it difficult for the teacher to function, she chooses to repress her feelings and her frustration. For example, when Semadar notices that her aide is troubled by personal affairs, she treats her supportively and considerately and, despite the hardship, elects to shoulder the burden of running the preschool as both teacher and aide.

I really understand her; she’s going through tough times. But I won’t lie. It’s very hard. It’s no simple thing to work that way, when she’s upset all the time, steps out to make phone calls. ... But I feel that it’s right, now ... Even if it falls on her shoulders ... I understand that she can’t be accessed in any case. ... I leave her alone; she needs this time.

In another example, Carmela describes how she conceals the immense difficulty that she faces when her aide misses much work time, forcing her to bring in a parade of substitutes. Carmela acts in this manner in order not to impair the aide’s motivation:

When she underwent an operation, it embittered my life! I worked with students, mothers, assistants, substitutes. The kids went totally off the track; it was so hard. ... But I didn’t make the aide feel that she was a burden to us when she came back; she understood and was much more on the program.

One of the unique characteristics of the preschool as an organization is the professional distance that exists between teachers and aides. The fact that aides are untrained sometimes places teachers in situations where, even if it clashes with pedagogical principles, they have to allow their aides to engage children in activities that do not develop their skills and creativity in order sustain the aides’ motivation. Ronit, for example, describes the need to repress her anger and frustration over the nature of the activity that her aide facilitates:

Interviewer: You say you’re satisfied with her but I can hear that you’re really not ....

Ronit: It’s not that I’m satisfied or dissatisfied. Sometimes her “initiatives” are just pedagogically unsuitable.

Interviewer: For example?

Ronit: Before the festivals. She likes to put up a “factory,” an “assembly line”—has everyone do the same thing: jugs, clowns….

Interviewer: What’s the problem?

Ronit: It’s the way she interprets it. It’s cute and the parents like it. In practice—it’s just decoration, banal, unchanging, like templates….

Interviewer: You’re the boss….

Ronit: Yes, I am. But I bite my lips because if I say something, she’ll be offended and she won’t function. So I take a deep breath, blink [laughs], tell her “Thank you so much for making the effort,” and move on….

Similarly, Orit describes returning from a day off and finding that the fill-in teacher taught contents incongruous with her program. Quashing her feelings, she puts on a show of ebullience for the children and elects to confront the fill-in face-to-face and cautiously:

Orit: It’s very hard to synchronize things with the fill-in teacher because all done by phone and text messages. ... Usually I gladly approve what she wants to do because she’s very positive and the children love her.

Interviewer: So what’s the problem?

Orit: She took her latitude one step too far ... simply backwards. Like the time she turned the kindergarten into something like first grade ... notebooks, letters, exercises ... when I got there, the children jumped on me with the notebooks, I was in shock, but I couldn’t disappoint them, so I said—Hey, that’s great! I felt it was so wrong that I had to tell her, but I’ll do it on tiptoes. ... We’ll talk it over, but not on the phone so it won’t end badly .... I don’t want to offend her. I don’t want her to seize up.

The granting of autonomy to fill-in teachers, and the nature of the autonomy given, depend on the extent of trust that the teachers have in their ability and maturity to act professionally. It also seems to hinge on the nature of the teacher, as surfaces in the interview with Tsipi, who found it hard to relinquish control but acknowledged the importance of autonomy in motivating a fill-in teacher who was new on the job:

At first, it was important for me to be totally [!] in the picture and in control. ... Slowly I let go; I freed her. It took courage; she’s inexperienced.

That I still don’t really rely on her is my issue! I’m working on myself because I have to let her develop, to bring herself in. I mustn’t get on her case, even if it makes me uncomfortable.

The interviews showed that the need to protect the delicate fabric of relations among staff members and to keep the preschool on an even keel sometimes prompts teachers to repress anger in order to avoid confrontation and to restraint themselves even when staff members’ comportment clashes with their expectations as managers. Yael describes how she copes with faulty behavior by Nitza, her aide, and explains that although flush with fury she restrains herself firmly and avoids a confrontation that might dent their good relationship:

There’s a thin line to walk here. We’re a team and we have to continue working together, even if it’s sometimes really hard. I have to ask for every little thing…. She’s is self-centered and fiddles around with such marginal things. I explode inside—but I hold it in. Instead of telling her drop everything now and do what I say, I approach her again and again and I don’t show her that I’m angry…. It’s not simple….

Penina also expresses fear of impairing the ability to motivate and doing damage to the preschool climate. Defending her choice of doing tasks that belong to the aide’s purview as a motivational tactic, she explains that by repressing resentment and anger toward the aide, she maintains the stability of staff relations and, in turn, the generally positive climate that she inculcates at the preschool:

It doesn’t bother me that I swept the yard or changed a kid’s diaper instead of her. For domestic harmony and “industrial peace,” I don’t think it’s problematic to defer at times…. I don’t bang my head against the wall; I’ve learned to meet her part-way. … Yes, it’s infuriating, but I realize that it doesn’t pay. She thinks of it as helping out, just so, and then she’s grateful and she repays the debt in spades!

An interesting phenomenon emerged from interviews with teachers who work with long-tenured and elderly aides. It turns out that age gaps, closeness, and strong interpersonal relations create sensitivities that impede teachers’ ability to respond in real time to faulty performance by longstanding aides, lest their dignity be offended. Thus, Ronit feels “indebted” to her aide, who accepted her at the beginning of her career, and is afraid to criticize her. She restrains itself, turns a blind eye to misconduct, and chooses indirect ways of motivating her in routine matters. Only in exceptional cases does she react by issuing a direct and assertive order:

Interviewer: When she doesn’t function correctly, what do you do?

Ronit: To Madie? I look the other way. I feel indebted to her—she’s the one who got me my job. I was young and really clueless…. Without her, I wouldn’t be where I am today….

Interviewer: But when won’t you give in to her?

Ronit: I don’t give in! I look for a way to improve, to correct, delicately and politely, and that’s not easy either. I have to work up my courage and put her in her place…. Once I saw “something” in the yard…. That was a red line for me. I went inside, took a deep breath, and then when I came out I told her, “That’s unacceptable!” quietly but clearly! I had a very hard time with it.

In an extension of Ronit’s deference, Orit, who works with an elderly aide, sometimes does things for which the aide is responsible and calls it “smoothing rough edges,” a compromise and a motivational tactic based on acquiescence, concern, and caring:

When something doesn’t get done, I do it even if it’s her job…. I don’t think it’s demeaning for me to pick up a rag. It’s consideration in action!... I “smooth the rough edges” because this is what I’ve got …. She’s old and she really tries very hard.

Coping with changes is especially difficult for elderly staff members. To surmount the problem, Keren presents Rachel, her aide, with every change and describes its nature gradually and considerately even though she has already made up her mind to go ahead:

Keren: I really like to innovate. I come out of an in-service activity with this crazy drive to start something new, and then?... I have to chill out and consider her slow pace, her seniority … in order to make her feel that it’s ours. That’s part of the act….

Interviewer: An act?

Keren: Yes…. I, like, consult with her, present the change as a challenge, and take it to places that are important to me. But I understand that it’s a tango—I take one step back and that lets me take two steps forward….

Age gaps aside, lengthy friendships among staff members impede change. Galia and Batya, for example, have become true friends during their twelve years of working together. Galia, the teacher, emphasizes that despite the friendship, when she needs motivate her aide to cooperate in making changes, she has to disengage emotionally in order to act professionally despite the emotional hardship that this causes:

Galia: If I kept my discourse with her on a friendly level all the time, we’d never get anywhere!...

Interviewer: It’s hard to motivate when there’s a friendship, isn’t it?

Galia: It’s a friendship, but with limits. Sometimes it’s really hard. Because if I want to change something important and it’s uncomfortable or unsuitable for her, I have to take off my “friend-hat,” get out of this place of “it’s unpleasant for me,” and put on my “manager-hat.”… I have to establish an emotional distance and say, “OK, there’s a problem here; yes, we’re friends—but there’s a preschool to run here!!! It’s hard for me and it’s got to be hard for her, too….

The teachers’ adoption of flexibility over management as a motivational tactic, manifested in the repression of negative emotions when they communicate with staff members, plainly flows from a conscious executive decision to preserve the preschool’s positive climate, stability, and status quo.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the emotional dimension that entwines itself in the strategies that preschool teachers use to motivate their staff and the tactics they invoke to motivate staff members to do their jobs effectively, with reference to the expression and management of these emotions. The data were harvested from interviews with and observations of teachers and staff members that focused on detecting the methods that teachers use, with the considerations for the choice of these methods and the way the staff members perceive them in the background.

The first insight that emerges from the discussion of the findings is that emotions occupy an important place in motivating preschool staff because aspects of emotion, foremost its management, are reflected in all four motivational tactics that teachers use to motivate staff members: interpersonal and professional outreach, partnering, professional empowerment, and appreciation of job performance. Furthermore, effective employee-motivation tactics in preschools rest on foundations of emotion management, carried out by expressing and deliberately regulating positive emotions. Specifically, the findings show that teachers express positive emotions to give support in personal situations, co-opt staff into processes of change, create empowerment, and express appreciation.

The assumption that underlies the explanation of this insight is that the teaching profession is typified by intense emotional expression and management and that educators are influenced by emotional rules specific to the educational ecosystem (Hargreaves, 1998; Nias, 1989; Oplatka, 2004). The specific explanation of this significant finding lies in the managerial complexity of the preschool as a small organization, differentiated from other organizations in its structure and in the dynamic that exists between the teacher and her educational staff. The unique structure of the preschool as an organization is manifested in two ways: staff members who work together continually and shoulder-to-shoulder throughout the workday, and the teacher as the fill-in teacher’s superordinate even though they do not share work time—a structure that does not exist in large educational organizations. Due to this singularity, teachers take personal and professional action to develop support-based closeness and relations with staff members that rely on close acquaintance, demonstration of concern and caring, partnering, empowerment, and appreciation. The teachers’ purpose in behaving this way is to stimulate positive emotions in staff members and motivate them to do their jobs effectively. Working in a positive emotional climate becomes doubly important in the context of the preschool as a venue of early childhood education. To optimize their development, these youngsters need a supportive and warm climate and a sense of “home,” as the participants’ remarks confirm. Accordingly, the reflection of emotional aspects in teachers’ motivational tactics proves to be unique to preschools (Firsteter, 2015; Maskit & Firstater, 2016; Oplatka & Eizenberg, 2007).

On the basis of studies among organizations (including schools) in which personal closeness between management and staff is found to be a motivational factor, it is shown in this study that the unique manifestations of personal and professional closeness as a motivational tactic in preschools lead to the formation of an intimate and family-like web. According to the literature, labor relations in small organizations are indeed characterized by personal attention, consistent communication, reciprocity between management and labor, and the absence of rigidity and formality—all of which helping to encourage workers and motivate them to improve their performance, develop commitment, and advance the organization in a sense of partnership and responsibility (Greene, Brush & Brown, 2015).

One may explain this finding by arguing, on the basis of various needs theories, that employee motivation flowing from emotions and their expression, as they emerge in this study, abets the gratification of social-belonging needs that reflect individuals’ fundamental need for connection with, love of, and closeness to people—which, in turn, contribute to job satisfaction, commitment, and motivation (Alderfer, 1972; Herzberg, 2003; Maslow, Frager & Cox, 1970). Specifically, a sense of belonging and a community-like climate have a salutary effect on teachers’ perseverance, effort, and job commitment, i.e., their motivation to function effectively on the job (Schuh, Bark, Van Quaquebeke, Hossiep, Frieg & Van Dick, 2014).

Another insight that emerges from the discussion of the findings pertains to the emotional aspect of employee motivation in the professional sense: preschool teachers choose to exercise leadership more by regulating their emotions than by invoking formal authority. To maintain the integrity of the motivational processes, preschool teachers tend to refrain from explicitly expressing their managerial authority and emphasizing the hierarchical structure of their staff. In other words, to motivate staff members, teachers choose a personal, egalitarian, and emotion-based point of departure and avoid the exclusive use of the authority that their hierarchical status as the managers of the organization gives them. To make this happen, they translate the authority and the power that they derive from their job description into emotional energy. Namely, they waive the officialities and the managerial posture that come with their managerial role in favor of displays of executive flexibility and consideration that intensify professional intimacy with the staff and abet the staff’s motivation to do its job well.

This need to flatten the professional hierarchy flows from the professional culture of early-childhood settings, which steers preschool teachers toward the construction of labor relations based on personal closeness (“You have to come from your personal human place, not from [job] descriptions”) egalitarianism (“I talk as though I’m on the same level”), flexibility, consideration, and non-use of formal management skills (“playing the manager,” “bossy affectations”) that may establish a distance between preschool teachers and staff and, by so doing, subvert stability (“domestic harmony”) and impair their ability to motivate staff. This finding is consistent with research on emotion management in teaching, both in the context of encouraging manifestations of concern and caring, assistance and support, and in the responsibility and professional commitment that are intrinsic to the teaching profession (Prosser, 1999). In addition, the research literature conflates the use of force and authority as “emotional energy” with the concept of “power with,” reflected in a managerial stance that supports closeness and the exercise of power as emotional energy that, instead of focusing on control and supremacy, positions the manager as a colleague and a partner—someone who may not have an advantage of judgment over his/her workers in planning and decision-making processes (Oplatka, 2015; Blasé & Anderson, 1995; Fennell, 1999).

By conceptualizing the use and the specific manifestations of power as “emotional energy,” this study augments the findings of research on staff management and motivation in various education and caregiving contexts other than the specific case of the preschool as an organizational structure. These studies demonstrate the existence of a change of trend in the perception of interaction between managers and subordinates: a transition from control- and task-focused hierarchical management to leadership of teams as partners in planning and decision-making (Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly & Konopaske, 2012; Owens & Valesky, 2011; Schuh et al., 2014; Shorter, 2013). Accordingly, the findings above exemplify the use of power as emotional energy that tones down managerial posturing in order to lead the members of the preschool staff, i.e., as a unique motivational tactic applied via personal and professional outreach.

The analysis and discussion in this study yield another insight relating to emotion management and regulation, stressing the repression of emotions by preschool teachers as part of the staff motivation process. The most prominent emotions that the teachers repress are anger and frustration. This finding is consistent with research on emotion repression that marks anger and frustration as the most repressed emotions of all (Grandey, Foo, Growth & Goodwin, 2012; Hver, Akerjordet & Furunes, 2013). Among preschool teachers, these feelings surface pursuant to situations in which the staff’s job performance does not meet their expectations and instructions; they also arise when teachers need to take action vis-à-vis staff members who lack appropriate training. This gap is prevalent among teaching aides, particularly older ones, because they lack the pedagogical skills that are needed for preschool work and due to difficulty on the job occasioned by their attention to personal problems.

The study shows that preschool teachers choose to assume the burden of running their facility under these conditions (“I bite my lip,” “I ‘smooth the rough edges”) and rationalize their choice of collegial relations and personal and professional closeness, despite its personal price, as a motivational tactic (“She feels that it’s right, now ... even if it falls on her shoulders”). Similarly, it is considered unacceptable among human-services staff to demonstrate anger toward colleagues or occupation peers (Grandey, Rafaeri, Ravis, Wirtz & Steuner, 2010).

In the preschool teachers’ judgment, maintaining restraint, avoiding conflict and reaction, and even forbearance are suited to the uniqueness of work with preschool children. They help to maintain the stability of the preschool and motivate staff to do their jobs with a sense of optimization based on support, consideration, and managerial flexibility. This rationale, which affirms the contribution of emotion repression to the attainment of professional goals, recurs in research on teachers (Näring, Briët, & Brouwers, 2006). However, when something that deviates from ethical and professional behavior occurs (“a red line for me”), the teachers repress their anger, frustration, and disappointment and respond from a position of control, personally and pointedly.

Accordingly, the characteristics of the preschool as an organization create a unique working culture among staff that affects teachers’ emotional management. This finding is consistent with studies that reinforce the effect of the ideological and cultural basis of the teaching profession, its pedagogical beliefs, and the emotional rules that are uniquely indicative of it, on educators and staff coping methods that flow from strong feelings of commitment, responsibility, and concern (Nias, 1999; Prosser, 1999; Zembylas, 2005).

Theoretical and applied implications

At the theoretical level, the study contributes to research on organizational behavior and education administration by broadening the conceptualization of employee-motivation tactics generally. and those in the preschool setting as an educational organization particularly, to include focusing on emotional regulation and management. In the field of education administration, the study sheds additional light on the preschool as an organization and on the role of the preschool teacher from angles not researched hitherto.

At the applied level, the study contributes to the professional training and development of pre-primary teaching staff by assimilating techniques and strategy of emotion management into motivational processes in the specific context of the preschool as an organization.

**Proposed future research:** Since the preschool is a small organization by definition, processes of emotion management with emphasis on repression should be examined in small organizations run by men. This would illuminate the relationship between the emotional-management characteristics of preschool teachers, who are female, and those of other managerial personnel in small organizations (including preschools run by men).

The participants in this study were preschool teachers who had ten to twenty years of seniority, i.e., those in their “professional adulthood” (Eizenberg, 2005). Since teachers’ emotional response may vary in the course of their careers (Sutten, 2002) and professional seniority also affects teachers’ emotions on the job (Stephanou, 2013), the question of emotion management and regulation should be examined at additional stages of teachers’ careers, such as the outset or ahead of retirement.