**Organizational change in schools reflecting perception of values:**

**An educational vision for institutionalizing a culture of caring**

**Abstract**

The present study examines how perceptual and organizational changes in an educational system can institutionalize a culture of commitment, responsibility, and caring. We examine a case study of an elementary school in Israel that established such a culture. Data were collected primarily through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 staff members, 10 parents of students, and 10 students, supplemented by observations and collected documents. Findings were analyzed according to a case study approach based on a qualitative-phenomenological methodology. Two main themes emerged: a leadership strategy prioritizing the wellbeing of organization members, and development of caring behaviors. “”Findings are discussed in the context of three phases of change: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. In the initiation phase, the school principal set goals supporting staff members’ emotional wellbeing and responding to their needs. During the implementation phase, perceptions in line with the vision and policy were developed, and assimilated by staff members. In the institutionalization phase, a “positive spin” reached and was accepted by the organization’s members, creating a culture of caring. This study contributes to knowledge of how a positive organizational culture can be created at a school through integration of new perceptions and principles.

**Introduction**

Over the years, politicians and educational policymakers have proposed various reforms to improve the development of change processes in schools. However, change is a complex and difficult process, and the natural tendency of people and of organizational systems is to avoid change as much as possible (Oplatka, 2015). Moreover, there are many difficulties in correcting and changing the working methods of teachers who are accustomed to certain methods, and encouraging them to new ways of learning and teaching that are tailored to current needs.

Cultural, social, organizational, and psychological barriers to change include: the great complexity involved in the change itself; teachers’ conservatism and resistance to change; poor management of change processes; differences among policymakers in the educational world; differences in perceptions of responsibility, required outputs, indices of productivity, and more. Additionally, gaps between the “desirable” “”educational approach required from teachers, and the nature of the school and the teaching profession limits teachers’ autonomy, flexibility, and creativity (Nir, 2017). Thus, a reality has been created in which it is difficult for an educational system to institute processes of change. The educational system has continued to operate in a similar manner for many generations, despite the numerous instances of public and private funding dedicated to implementing various reforms and establishing management systems to improve them (Cuban, 2013; Yılmaz, & Kılıçoğlu, 2013).

**An Optimal Educational Environment**

In the professional literature, there are many theories regarding the impact of a positive environment on the optimal development of the individual. Rogers (1969) argued that an environment allowing for positive interactions will influence individuals’ perceptions of the “self” and provide opportunities for adaptation, self-fulfillment, freedom of choice, self-expression, and manifestation of their personal skills. Similarly, Buber (1973) referred to an environment in which I-You relationships are based on connection, respect, addressing needs, and positive dialogue, which allow for a sense of wellbeing, development, and growth. Ryan and Deci’s theory of self-determination (2000) emphasizes the universal tendency of individuals to develop their inherent potential in an environment that provides for three needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. These allow for optimal functioning, personal growth, integration, social development, intrinsic motivation, and a sense of optimal wellbeing. Recent approaches in the field of criminology and positive psychology also refer to positive conditions in an environment that enable individuals to utilize their internal strengths in order to cope with difficulties and barriers, and to achieve higher physical endurance, longer life expectancy, greater success in life, and a sense of self-fulfillment (Ronel & Elisha, 2010; Seligman, 2019).

A school’s environment is defined according to the subjective perceptions held by each individual in the school towards the culture, atmosphere, processes, and accepted behaviors. This environment is a significant factor influencing individual’s’ sense of belonging, self-esteem, and behavior (Zullig et al., 2010). That is, individuals’ positive feelings towards the organizational environment influenced by attitudes, feelings, and expectations for relationships within that environment, and these feelings have positive implications for ’individual’s psychological development (Argyris, 2017). Thus, a school climate characterized by openness, team spirit, involvement, satisfaction, sense of belonging, and perception of work as a challenge, offers individuals positive experiences that contribute to their emotional wellbeing, mutual social support, self-confidence, motivation for learning, social engagement, and creative activity (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015).

**An Organizational Culture of Caring and its Implications**

The organizational culture of a school is defined as the set of explicit and implicit assumptions, expressions, symbols, values, beliefs, and social conventions shared by participants in various sectors of the organization (Glisson & James, 2002; Samuel, 1990). According to Tzafroni (2008), organization’s degree of effectiveness and success is determined by three variables: adaptation to the needs of the changing environment; organizational strength as expressed in full alignment between the declared values and their realization; and partnership and integration of the organizational culture at all levels, without creating subcultures. These three variables affect the organization’s ability to delineate a direction, sense of meaning and purpose to the population of its members. Another significant factor that determines the nature of the organization is the type of paradigm that exists within it. A traditional paradigm focuses on the weaknesses and shortcomings of the organization. A positive paradigm, in contrast, creates an organizational culture that enables its members and employees to develop their strengths and offers a sense of community, mutual connection, sense of meaning, purpose, and wellbeing (Karakas, 2010). An organization with a positive paradigm also offers beneficial processes and components such as higher levels of job satisfaction, motivation, and ability to perform the job (Arifin, 2015). Further, this type of paradigm explores and identifies driving forces and ways in which individuals, teams, and organizations can grow, thrive, and develop their strengths to reach a high level of achievement (Stephan et al., 2016; Tzafroni, 2006).

A positive culture at a school is based on prosocial and democratic values that are manifest, in practice, at the school. This culture is based on communication and ongoing dialogue between people in all parts of the educational institution, the setting of common goals, and response to the cultural and social needs of its diverse student population (Gay, 2018). One component of this culture is empathic education, which emphasizes sensitivity and caring. Empathic education is expressed through teaching methods, interpersonal relationships, and methods of assessment that respect the individuality of each child (Oplatka, 2018; Rogers, 1977). Noddings (2008, 2010) defined caring as making a commitment to and taking responsibility for responding, in a practical and beneficial way, to the legitimate needs of others, while paying attention to and emphasizing the emotions and content that will help individuals develop and realize their potential. Caring is expressed in empathic behavior, acceptance and inclusion of differences, trust, respectful interpersonal relationships, sensitive and empowering dialogue, satisfaction of needs, and more. Many theories have found caring to be significant for individuals’ optimal development and emotional wellbeing. Accordingly, a “culture of caring” in a school is a value-based educational policy with a positive worldview that prioritizes interpersonal relations and offers opportunities for individuals to ability to develop values and express caring (Laor & Cohen, 1993). Such a culture exists system-wide, and encompasses the organizational structure, strategies, a clear commitment to the norms and values of justice, empathy, dialogue, consideration, and opportunities to take responsibility and perform acts of caring (Kaplan & Danino, 2002).

Previous studies have demonstrated the positive consequences of caring-based interventions in educational systems. For example, it has been found that the implementation of a “caring community of learners” as part of a child development intervention program in elementary schools was correlated with positive outcomes, as expressed in students’ strong sense of community and greater consideration for others. In turn, these outcomes have been found to be related to positive attitudes and feelings towards school and learning, intrinsic motivation, social attitudes, values, problem-solving skills, social adaptation, reduction of behavioral problems, and more (Solomon et al., 2000). Similarly, it has been found that implementing caring-based programs in elementary schools contributes to the reduction of violence, consideration among students, and expression of caring values among teachers, without compromising students’ or teachers’ autonomy (Assor et al., 2018).

**Purpose of the Current Study**

Given the difficulty and complexity of implementing educational reforms among school staff, which often do not work well, the current study examines a school successfully initiated and implemented a systemic and comprehensive change, using its own internal strengths, and without special economic resources. Specifically, the study sheds light on the components that existed at the examined school, which enabled them to initiate processes that produced systemic and comprehensive change using their internal strengths, without special economic resources. To this end, the perceptions, processes, ways of working and their impact are examined and discussed.

**Methodology**

**Research Methods**

The current research was conducted according to a case study approach, based on the qualitative-phenomenological methodology. This allows for learning in real-world situations, without conditions of control and supervision of the process, which is comprehensive, rich, in-depth, and conducted in an appropriate setting in the educational system (Patton, 1990). The researchers’ presence at the research site is not one of neutral observers. Rather, they have practical and personal knowledge that influences their absorption and interpretation of the observed phenomena (Zabar Ben-Yehoshua, 1995). In the professional literature, there is agreement on two main objectives of qualitative-educational research. The first is to shed light on human behavior. The goal of the current research is to develop a theoretical model that offers innovations, based on the existing body of knowledge and research, regarding how to have a positive influence and create a caring environment. The second objective is to explore this culture as a way to assist decision makers, for example, through identifying school activities that support various aspects of a positive environment (Cook et al., 2016).

**Research Participants**

The study took place at the Weizmann State Elementary School in Herzliya, Israel. This school was chosen as the case study due to the first author’s prior awareness of this school as an organization with a culture that is beneficial to everyone within it. The student population is diverse and includes, among others, at-risk children, students studying in special education classes, and students with special needs who are integrated into regular classes. The staff members are also part of a heterogenous socio-cultural fabric: veterans and newcomers, religious and secular, of varied ages, from diverse socioeconomic status, and from different cultures. The number of staff members is stable. The parents of students are involved in the school, and the school interacts with the community.

The school operates according to a special pedagogical concept aimed at fulfilling the differential needs of the students. It conducts individual and organizational processes for their advancement, engages in enrichment and development activities for faculty, has a well-maintained environment, and creates relationships with parents and the community. The school’s educational approach has been presented at various conferences. The school has been visited by delegations from Israel and abroad, whose purpose was to learn about the processes and projects carried out at the school.

The study population was selected using intentional sampling of representatives from three groups: staff members, parents of students, and students. The study population consisted of 35 participants. This included 15 staff members of varying characteristics: the school principal, the school counselor, six general educators who teach at different grade levels, two teachers of specific subjects, and five staff members who fulfill other functions: teaching assistant, principal of the afternoon program, coordinator of advanced education, coordinator of special education, and school manager. The study population also included 10 parents of students attending the school and 10 students.

**Research Tools**

The primary research tool was semi-structured in-depth interviews, adapted to each of the groups of participants. The interviews were conducted on the basis of a written interview guide of open-ended questions, addressing in detail the topics related to the purpose of the study. The wording and order of the questions was not predetermined (Zabar Ben-Yehoshua, 1995). The interviews were conducted in a flexible manner, so that each interviewee could focus and expand upon a specific relevant topic or area which he or she found interesting wished to address in more detail. Thus, the narratives emerged from a personal perspective based on the meaning the interviewees attributed to their experience (Shakedi, 2003).

Secondary research tools used were observations of study participants, and collection of personal and organizational documents. Observations of participants were conducted during a variety of school activities such as plenary sessions, seminars, professional staff meetings, various classes, free time between classes, parent meetings, and training sessions for parents. In addition, relevant personal and organizational documents (e.g., minutes of meetings, students’ personal files, letters of appreciation received by the school, and data on school efficiency and growth indices) were accessed in order to understand the culture under study and to expand the database that assisted in the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

**Research Procedure**

First, approval was obtained from the Office of the Chief Scientist and from parents. The research population was then selected by the first author, in consultation with the administrative team. This was done through intentional sampling to achieve, to the greatest extent possible, interviewees who hold a variety of opinions, who come from various cultural backgrounds, and who were motivated to participate. The location of the interview was determined according to the convenience of the participant.

Each interview session opened with an explanation of the purpose and process of the study. Participants all signed an informed consent and were assured that the research would be conducted in compliance with all rules of ethics and confidentiality. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, first by hand and later into a computer. The data that emerged from the observations of the participants and the collected documents were recorded in a protocol or as detailed field lists to which comments and insights were added.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative content analysis was applied to the raw data, in order to locate the key themes in the results. According to this approach, the researcher attempts to reveal the interviewees’ worldviews and practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994). Analysis is based on an integrative method, which allows the researcher to maintain the scientific and systematic nature of the research, while referring to the unique world of each of the participants (Shakedi, 2003). Accordingly, in the current study, the data analysis process uses the content analysis model proposed by Shakedi (2003), which identifies themes and “super-categories” which are arranged into a narrative in the written research report.

**Validity, Reliability, and Prevention of Bias in the Research**

The fact that the chief researcher is a former staff member of the organization under investigation raises questions regarding her involvement as an “insider researcher”. Thus, a number of processes were carried out in order to achieve a high level of internal validity and to maintain reliability: the research extended over a period of over ten months in the arena under investigation; triangulation; conducting interviews with two groups of participants with diverse characteristics; and use of observation and document analysis as secondary research tools.

In addition, participants were asked to mention any difficulties in the interview, in order to allow them to critique underlying and prior assumptions held by the researcher. The data were disclosed to the interviewees in order to allow them to correct or re-address the findings presented. At the end of the discussion, participants were given a written summary of the findings. The second author served as an external reader in the collection and analysis of the data. Other aspects that helped prevent bias were the documentation and preservation of internal and external documents, the recordings and transcriptions of interviews, and comments written during the observations.

**Professional Ethics**

The study received approval from the Institutional Committee of Bar Ilan University, and from the Chief Scientist from Israel’s Ministry of Education. Data collection was done with sensitivity, maintaining boundaries, respecting confidentiality, informed consent, and in adherence to all required rules of ethics.

**Results**

The findings of the study addressed the perceptions, principles, and ways of working in the school that enabled change in the perceptual, behavioral, and emotional realms. The findings also address the implications of the organizational culture on the individuals within it. The main findings from the interviews and the secondary research tools will be presented using two key themes that emerged from the data analysis: a managerial strategy that prioritizes the wellbeing of individuals in the organization, and construction of caring behavior, based on the “correct perspective.”

**Managerial Strategy that Prioritizes the Wellbeing of Individuals in the Organization**

The study found that the approach of the school principal (referred to here as *S.*) and the organization’s existing policy places central importance on the staff and their needs. This approach is based on the premise that in order for teachers and other school officials to fulfill their duties and succeed in their work with students, they need to stand “a quarter of a step above them”. That is, if members of the organization feel satisfied, significant, that their needs are being met, and that they are developing, they will succeed in their work, even with the most challenging children, or with other problems they face. To support this approach, the school has prioritized various learning processes intended to enable the staff to feel secure by responding optimally to their personal and professional needs. This is done through open dialogue, processes of empowerment, partnership and involvement, professional development, and peer support, as detailed below.

One of the principal’s leadership qualities that received great professional appreciation from all parties was her ability to have an open, accepting, respectful, and beneficial dialogue with staff members, parents, and students, even when it included criticism or a request that a decision be changed. As the organization’s leader, S. provided information, consulted with and supported others, offered direction, raised objections, and passed along criticism, while setting boundaries whenever the discourse harmed the organizational vision. As a result, staff members reported positive feelings such as wellbeing, acceptance, inclusion, empowerment, trust and confidence.

*“The staff is not quiet or submissive. They say what they think. Teachers dare to speak. They know she will not hurt them. They are not afraid to tell her things. ... She listens to the end and says: ‘Let’s look at ourselves again’ ... There is openness. If I do not tell her what I think, it would be considered that I am being negligent. I feel open and confident enough to tell her what I think.”*

In addition, staff members’ sense of empowerment was a significant component in their sense of wellbeing and was perceived as a response to their needs. The interviews indicated that empowerment took place in a variety of ways, such as encouraging their leadership of individual and system-wide projects and initiatives, as well as offering visibility and transparency regarding successes.

*“I brought a teacher who was in a difficult personal crisis to a better place, on a personal and professional level. She flourished. Despite her endless struggles and the impossible tests that the staff gave her, she brought us to a place that demonstrates mathematics.“ -- The principal, S.*

*“S. takes people on the staff who are weak professionally and gives them a place, a home, a purpose, guides them. She empowers people that no one else thought could go so far.”*

*“Her belief in a person and his ability to advance, identifying his personal and professional qualities, gives all staff members the opportunity for development...”*

*“S. contacted me, and said, ‘You have a lot to contribute, but I’m not seeing it.’ She offered me a role that is ‘me’. I am more comfortable when others take responsibility, but she asked, and I could not refuse her.”*

The reports indicate that this sense of empowerment led to an increased sense of trust in the principal, commitment to the organization’s values, motivation for action and involvement, self-confidence, self-efficacy, satisfaction, and enjoyment of work. Moreover, these feelings were reported as motivating the staff members to lead a similar empowerment process with their students and the parents:

*“It’s like a snowball. You get carried away and empower others, and suddenly you see more things.”*

The current study also examined how staff members’ needs were met by encouraging them to be partners in system-wide processes. For example, staff members were encouraged to be involved in making budgetary decisions for the organization, to help integrate new employees, to join committees addressing issues on the daily agenda or dilemmas and challenges arising from sources outside the school, to help choose professional training courses, and more.

*“S. gives people choices, allows them to have a broad vision. She doesn’t put people in their place. She opens up opportunities, conveys her trust. Anyone who wants to be on a leadership team, can. It is a choice.”*

Further, the study found that professionals from outside the organization who are not employees of the Ministry of Education, such as assistants and paramedic caregivers, are perceived as full partners and an integral part of the staff. They are invited to professional and social meetings, school seminars, and even take part in teachers’ committees. This partnership was reported as enabling the development of a professional, committed, and empowered workforce that promotes the school and reduces resistance to change among its members. Similar to this professional empowerment, on the personal level the partnership was reported as giving a sense of satisfaction, appreciation, ability, motivation, strengthening the interpersonal connection, and improving individuals’ sense of belonging to the organization.

In addition, the findings show that the organization promotes a lifestyle of ongoing learning and professional development for staff members in all realms: educational, professional, therapeutic, support staff, and administration. This is carried out in various areas relevant to the promotion of the educational approach, such as: learning disabilities, life skills, diversity, adapted learning, at-risk children, intimate dialogue, alternative means of assessment, and more. The staff members reported that this promotes interpersonal communication, contributes to a positive atmosphere, and instils optimal perceptions and supportive processes in the organization. It was also reported that there is peer support among the staff members and assistance from various professionals in accordance with their emerging needs in terms of working with the students. Support is provided individually or systemically. It may be focused and structured, or spread throughout the year. This style of work was noted in the interviews as a significant factor contributing to professionalism and strengthening the staff both professionally and personally. The intuitive work of the staff has been replaced by inter-departmental meetings, with the principal, school psychologist, educators, classroom assistants, and parents. Meetings are scheduled as needed, with professionals from outside the school who work with the students, such as: social workers, a psychologist from a home for battered women, representatives from mental health institutes, and more. These expanded team meetings were reported as helpful to the staff in achieving comprehensive and thorough thinking, coming up with new ideas, assisting and monitoring the implementation of these ideas, establishing a common language among all professionals and developing a joint, interdisciplinary work plan. Mutual support and assistance were reported as keys to the staff members’ sense of belonging, ability, satisfaction, and job enjoyment.

*“They don’t say ‘we know’ but are always ready to learn, like a bottomless pit. They don’t wait for fires or an emergency. People sit together and meet in the evenings. The meetings are more in-depth, not time-bound. Meetings about children are not just to check things off a list. Not every leader has the ability to go to a level of deep analysis. She has the patience and the therapeutic and professional vision to sit with the staff.”*

*“There is no situation where someone asks someone else for help and is refused. The teachers call each other, encourage, work together. Everything is accessible. The doors are open for any deliberation. There is a feeling that you are not alone. A sense of togetherness is created. There is a respectful attitude. There is a sense that there is someone to talk to ... It is legitimate to say ‘this is difficult for me’ without feeling any sense of failure.”*

Another issue raised is that the school is a dynamic system, which continually adapts to the changing reality and the needs of the staff, through the development of processes and procedures that provide an optimal environment for everyone in the organization.

*“The smoking habit of some staff members was a real problem. For years, they would take a break in a remote room, off to the side. As part of the school’s policy of meeting people’s needs, we realized we needed to think of a better solution. In the end, we decided that we would allocate a budget for the construction of a clear, sealed glass partition inside the teachers’ room. In this way, the group of smokers could also be included. This is true for everyone.”*

It seems that the intention to create an optimal environment for the staff greatly contributed to the sense of social cohesion. Despite the various social and professional sub-groups within the staff, participants reported that there was a positive atmosphere among them. They had friendly interactions outside working hours, such as recreational days, birthday celebrations, and trips within Israel and abroad, including a trip abroad in which over 25 staff members participated. The staff members described their relationship as family-like. They shared personal issues such as a child’s bout with cancer, a difficult financial situation, a spouse’s unemployment, and same-sex relationships. As a result, the organization was reported to provide its employees with group support, belonging, and strength.

*“I did not want my mother to be buried in the afternoon because I knew the staff had advanced training courses. I wanted all the teachers to be with me.”*

*“School is like a miracle drug for me. It’s addictive, the love not only of the children but of the staff, who welcome me. I come to the teachers’ room earlier to meet, talk. Only afterwards, I enter the classroom ... There is something special about the staff who are so giving of themselves, and the welcoming atmosphere. These things are not talked about, they are understood as obvious.”*

Further, participants reported that the students were aware of the positive relationship among the staff members, and that this also affects and improves the relationships among the students. The staff’s strong sense of commitment to the organization, its principles, and the administration’s leadership style, was described as being driven by a high degree of intrinsic motivation that goes beyond the formal job definition, and which contributes to the staff’s sense of wellbeing.

*“The standards at the school have changed. There isn’t anyone who does nothing. It is impossible to do nothing. There is no situation in which people do not get involved, each to their own ability, and not because they are asked.”*

*“I come in on my days off. I don’t feel like a pushover, I feel it is my choice. I come because the meeting is important to me. I will come in instead of the assistant because I can’t leave the class alone. I am willing to do everything for the school, without making an accounting. I feel very connected to the school, so I do things whether I am rewarded for them or not.”*

*“To feel involved, to give of yourself, to feel that you are part of the action, means feeling you belong.”*

*“I do it for the children and also for myself. In commitment, there is the word ‘obligation’. I do not like that. I want to be here. I love what I do. I enjoy it. I feel complete. Even when it is difficult, I consider that a challenge.”*

**Developing Caring Behavior based on the “Correct Perspective”**

The study found that members of the studied organization demonstrate caring behavior based on mutual help, concern, and a value-based approach towards the “correct perspective”. This is seen as a priority for the organization and all relevant populations: relations among the staff members, between the staff and parents, between the staff and students, among the students, between parents and the school, and between the school and the community. The caring behavior has been described as sweeping, encompassing all its members, and allowing for a sense of belonging, satisfaction, and meaning.

*“Even if you aren’t naturally that way, you have no choice. The circle is widening. People see the beautiful things that go on here. There are so many good people. You take that atmosphere home with you. This environment and I, together we create something different. It educated me, taught me how things should be. Everyone is doing something. The large core group attracts the rest.”*

The findings indicate that from the time that S. began in her position as principal, her leadership style has been one of initiating processes of change in the organization. As one teacher noted, *“There is a clear line between the leadership before S., and with her.”* In the interviews, staff members described the principal’s ability to lead, influence perceptions, initiate change, and integrate new processes. Staff members described S. as a respectful person with values, and who enables and facilitates dialogue. These qualities made them “follow her through fire and water”. Her confidence in herself and in her chosen path, her confidence in the staff and students, and her position as a role model, all served to strengthen staff members’ confidence and trust in her and in themselves.

*“S. does not force. She does not threaten. Everything is done in a positive and non-stressful atmosphere. She believes so much in the change, that you feel you want to go along with her. She is very soothing, flexible, convincing, so that you cannot say no to her.”*

*“She doesn’t say things out of authority, but from an understanding of what seems obvious.”*

*“I adore her. She is a personal role model in her total commitment. She is very human. This affects our lives, because we know she will be there for us, too. I’d trust her with my eyes closed. ... She cannot be refused. She gives her soul. She does not demand anything from the staff that she does not do herself.”*

*“My child came in the middle of the session. She stopped, told everyone ‘wait a minute’. He told her some things. She listened, hugged, and kissed him and then he went out.”*

*“The small things create the big picture.”*

The high level of motivation exhibited by S. in promoting the school, her leadership ability, the changes she initiated (such as opening special education classrooms), the appreciation the school received for its work (for example, in the visits by the Minister of Education, the President of Israel, and professionals from Israel and abroad who came to observe their model) created a change in perception and image at the school. This was reported as contributing to a sense of commitment, satisfaction, pride and appreciation towards the principal and the organization.

Another aspect reported as contributing to the sense of commitment that S. inspired was the professional training courses that helped the staff members connect to the guiding ideology and direction. One example is the “Democracy” training, which was held in the teachers’ room once every two weeks for seven years. The entire staff attended, including the secretarial staff and security guards. The training focused on changing perceptions and integrating positive values into the organization. It enabled a meaningful personal and professional dialogue that created a uniform language among the staff members.

*“A deep commitment to caring does not appear on its own. Everyone must be committed to it. It doesn’t grow by itself. It needs to be watered. That is, there is no connection between what is good for people and their choices. To create a caring and egalitarian society, you have to work on your ability to do things better. This is a process that spreads over time and produces a different awareness.”*

*“The training provides an opportunity for the staff members to have an intimate and open dialogue, and to address, through personal experience and introspection, democratic values ​​such as: freedom, rights, majority-minority relations, acceptance of differences, fairness, and gender equality. It is impossible to go through interpersonal processes without internal, personal insights ... An example of such a process was a meeting about new immigrants: how they were doing as new immigrants, what they received, what they bring with them, their relationship to their children. This reconstructs feelings, and allows for different types of thinking.”*

According to participants’ reports, this value-based approach, based on caring and concern for others, has been systematically integrated into all layers of the organization. Thus, it is expressed in strong feelings of mutual support among staff members:

*“I was with the class on an annual trip, and my mother was hospitalized that night. In the morning, a taxi was waiting for me, out there in the field. It cost the school a lot of money, just to take me to the hospital”*

*“One of the teachers was with her husband in the hospital during summer vacation. We raised money for her children to go to summer camps.”*

*“When the son of one of the teachers fell ill, they were in a difficult situation. The school discreetly sent them parcels of food. We raised money to buy clothes, to get a more comfortable bed for her ill child.”*

Throughout the interviews, the staff members’ care for the students was also apparent. They described the child’s emotional wellbeing as a necessary, primary, and preliminary condition for learning. That is, there was a perception that there can be no effective learning process as long as a student is troubled by unmet needs at home, especially the student’s basic needs. Therefore, the staff members took action to satisfy these needs, even though this is not defined as one of the stated roles of the educational organization. It was also reported that in cases in which a student’s parents have difficulty functioning, the staff feels strongly committed, like they are a family, and the perception of their responsibility is expanded. Many examples of this came up in interviews. One teacher makes sandwiches for children at her home every morning. Another educator calls every morning to wake a student for school. Another teacher called a child during a vacation overseas to ask about his wellbeing. One teacher takes a student for weekly mental healthcare sessions. Some offer free private lessons. The school, in collaboration with the parents’ committee, assists children who need glasses, shoes, furniture, and more.

*“There is no limit to our involvement. We will not go to sleep if we know that families have nothing to eat. The means are there, you just need the will. If the home is not a supportive environment for the child, the school will provide it for him.”*

*“One girl knows who to ask. She knows she doesn’t have to stay hungry. She trusts that this place will provide for her basic need for food. The children are not ashamed. We do not label them. Other children also take food, if they forget their lunch at home. The giving is done discreetly, with respect for the parents and child.”*

The care and concern expressed by the staff members created a sense of wellbeing and security among the students, as reported in interviews.

*“[They are] like father and mother. There’s someone to worry, to give advice or offer a solution. When my Mom passed away, the school took care of me. I feel like the people at school love me.”*

*“There [at another school] they gave up on me right away. I was told ‘you’re kicked out of school’. This is the best school I’ve been to. The teachers, the class, treat you nicely even if you do not take your medication. Here they understand you and do not tell you: ‘Go home’.”*

The findings indicated a consistent and clear intention to encourage caring behavior among the students as well. This is done through structured programs that address values and offer opportunities to implement it in practice, informally and as a way of life. The perception is that when students help each other, they are actually helping themselves. That is, they construct ethical personality patterns that will accompany them along their life paths.

*“In class, it is important for us to help each other, to give. Everyone looks for what he can contribute, his strengths, in painting, on the computer, in drama. One of the kids brought a poster from home that reads: One for all, and all for one.”*

*“One boy never brings food, so I always give some to him. He feels that he has a lot of friends and that everyone cares for and respects him. That’s really nice, I feel that way too. I feel really happy that I’m helping.”*

*“It comes from our own initiative. No one has to tell us. We believe that if you give, you will also receive.”*

Moreover, at the educational organization under study, there was an expanded perception of responsibility towards the students’ parents, who were seen as necessary partners. Interviewees mentioned many examples of respectful and caring behaviors exhibited to meet parents’ particular needs. Staff members visited a student’s home when a baby brother was born. Support for court expenses was provided when the government wanted to deport a child of foreign workers. A teacher held a parents’ meeting at a student’s home when the mother was on maternity leave. A parents’ support group was held on a monthly basis at one of the teacher’s homes. The school accompanied parents to meetings with government authorities, offered mediation and assistance with professionals in the educational or therapeutic system, and more. Parents reported feelings of appreciation and gratitude for the staff members’ concern for them:

*“His teacher called me on her day off. She insisted I come to her house. She was like a mother to me.”*

*“There is a feeling that we are being listened to, that we have a voice and are not ‘just parents.’”*

This behavior of the staff was described as touching and inspiring the parents, who have become partners in the caring attitude and behavior of the school. Multiple examples of this were raised during the study. One mother volunteered for several hours each week in the secretarial office. A grandfather painted the school walls. Various student welfare projects were organized, such as a movie club, ongoing renovations of the schoolrooms, a breakfast club, making sandwiches for children during breaks, and more. In addition, parents were willing to financially assist needy families by raising donations from people inside and outside the school.

*“I feel it gets into my soul. It takes over me. The satisfaction is immense. Once I got ‘infected’, I couldn’t stop, but I really enjoy it. It gives me strength for the next thing, and the next thing. It’s like beneficial bacteria. Once you feel the initial feedback, it is impossible to stop. It has no limit. Doing otherwise becomes impossible. What does it do for me? More than winning a million dollars. A feeling that has no price. It is like a drug. It’s addictive. I have no other word for it.”*

Finally, the ripples of caring expand to and resonate with the community as well. The findings show that the organization has various programs that encourage altruistic behavior towards the community, such as a weekly program for the integration of children with intellectual disabilities, volunteering in nursing homes, tutoring in kindergartens, providing donations and assistance to a shelter for battered women, helping new immigrants and families facing difficult economic conditions, environmental initiatives, and more. In addition, members of the community volunteer and contribute to the school. Alumni and retirees help in the classrooms. A high-tech organization voluntarily runs a social-educational project for at-risk students. A teaching college helps students with learning disabilities, and more.

**Discussion**

The current research examines an educational organization that utilized its own internal resources to successfully initiate and implement change processes that develop caring behaviors and promote emotional wellbeing for everyone in the organization. The aim of the study was to analyze the perceptions and processes accompanying this approach, and its implications for the individuals in the organization. The findings indicate two main themes that deepen our understanding of this approach. The first theme pertains to a managerial strategy that prioritizes the wellbeing of the staff and strives to fulfill their needs. The second theme pertains to the development of caring behaviors and the impacts this has among the various layers of the organization. There was a widespread perception that the responsibility of the organization’s staff extends beyond the traditional roles, reflecting a deep sense of commitment to values.

The study shows how the vision this school principal offered of creating an optimal educational environment that promotes a sense of wellbeing evolved through a three-phase change process. This process addressed the goals, methods, and patterns of behavior that enabled the emergence of a fundamentally novel policy (Roffey, 2017). According to Bandura’s (1977) model, a significant change process cannot be based solely on external influences and reinforcements. Rather, change requires internal processes of intention and self-control that are supported by internal satisfaction and rewards, motivation, ability to retain information, and opportunities to put ideas into practice. The findings of this study are discussed below as they pertain to each of the three phases necessary to create a change that permeates an organizational culture: the initiation phase in which the change is planned and launched; the implementation phase in which the change is introduced; and the institutionalization phase, in which the change becomes an integral part of the organization (Oplatka, 2015).

**Initiation Phase**

The school principal is a key figure in everything that happens at the school, and is considered to be the most significant factor in the successful implementation of organizational change (Soini et al., 2016). A principal who focuses on developing a special organizational culture, can promote the trust and identification of the members, and enable the development of norms reflecting the spirit of the place (Willis et al., 2016). According to Bass (1985), a leader with a “transformative leadership” style acts according to an organizational vision that sets out a challenging future goal and sets a high standard for the members of the organization. In order to realize these expectations, the leader must cultivate among the organization’s members a belief in their own self-efficacy through processes of delegating responsibility and authority, development of professional autonomy, and ongoing learning. These processes assist in the integration of values, norms, and behaviors, and shape the desired atmosphere at the school in a way that helps all its members advance and flourish (Diaz-Saenz, 2011). Accordingly, the current study found a strong correlation between the school principal’s leadership ability, management style, and actions as a role model, with her success in creating a systemic change that creates an optimal atmosphere for all of the organization’s members. It was reported that staff members’ sense of trust in the organization was strengthened by the correspondence between the vision and the organizational policy that the principal outlined.

**Implementation Phase**

The school culture does not depend exclusively on the inherent goodness of its members and their choice to engage in long-term caring behavior. It requires, as one of the teachers on the leadership team pointed out, “consistent work towards improving the staff’s ability to do things better”. In line with this approach, processes were developed in the organization that reinforce the appropriate perceptions. This school offered diverse processes of staff training and learning. Peer learning has been found to strengthen leadership skills, challenge old beliefs, and offer new experiences in topics such as decision making, effective communication, and conflict resolution.

Additionally, peer learning contributes to professional development, a sense of commitment, and motivation for change (Zwart et al., 2015). The professional training courses offered at the organization under study were tailored to the needs of the staff, and enabled them to acquire professional and personal knowledge and tools. There was also a learning process related to emotions, values, and social learning, which allowed participants to undergo interpersonal and intrapersonal processes by discussing their objections, struggles, and difficulties. Kaplan and Danino (2002) noted that in order to create a caring community in a school, the staff members and leadership must undergo a meaningful process that addresses their attitudes, values, motivations, means of satisfying needs, empathy, and consideration for others. Changing individuals’ behavior involves their internalization and implementation of new ideas and processes. Therefore, a qualitative change can only occur if individuals in the organization do not feel their psychological needs are being threatened, and feel that the change is beneficial to them.

In the present study, it was reported that peer learning contributed to strengthening interpersonal communication between staff members, reduced members’ focus on themselves, and expanded their sense of responsibility to others. Moreover, a key perception at this organization is that there is a direct correlation between the emotional wellbeing of the employees and the achievement of the organization’s goals. One result of this perception is the creation of an optimal and prosocial environment for the staff. When a school system enables employees’ emotions to be addressed and their basic and psychological needs to be met, the organization benefits and becomes more efficient and productive (Zee & Koomen, 2016).

Previous studies have reported that teachers with a high level of commitment work harder than those with a low level of commitment. Teachers with a high level of commitment also have a tendency to devote more time to achieving the school’s goals, have more willpower to work for its success, and are more likely to “bend the rules” to achieve goals related to value-based educational perceptions (Cheasakul & Varma, 2016). These feelings of commitment enable greater consideration for others, tolerance for disagreement, readiness to accept criticism, and freedom of expression. It a gives a sense of meaning, belonging, interdependence, and shared responsibility for group progress (Nelissen et al., 2017). According to the model of Parke and Buriel (1998), positive behaviors develop in an environment that allows for three conditions: direct learning, experiential learning, and indirect learning through observation and imitation. With respect to direct learning, Addad et al. (2008) argued that habituation, conditioning, and learning processes accompanied by reinforcements from the environment are required in order for people to be willing to help and be accepting of others. This is based on the premise that many emotional, social, and value-based skills are acquired, and therefore can be practiced, developed, and perfected (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). The current study findings supported this, in terms of the school’s direct, understandable, and continuous approach to learning, which helps staff members and students deal with conflicts and dilemmas regarding these issues. Further, at this organization, this approach to learning is experienced and expressed through the routines of prosocial behaviors developed within the organization and outside it.

According to Buber’s dialogical theory (Buber, 1925, 1961a) relationships that are expressed in a positive connection with others and the person’s environment successfully develop one’s ability to move away from a focus on the self and to create caring, responsible, and committed relationships. When the environment develops routines that strengthen individuals’ contributions to others, they develop positive feelings such as belonging, caring, pride, and a sense of meaning. It strengthens their motivation and willingness to continue to behave positively towards others and to perpetuate and internalize the value of giving (Brooms, 2019; Longobardi et al. 2016). Further, Ronel and Segev (2014) asserted that a group of people acting on ethical principles can influence a deviant individual and provide the self-motivation to change. Such a change can occur when the individual is exposed to the suffering of others and given the opportunity to act upon and practice social behaviors that are contrary to an egocentric conception of morality.

Finally, the study demonstrated that indirect learning processes took place through exposure to a positive environment. This created an indirect model for observing, learning and imitating caring among the various populations: leadership, staff members, students, parents, and the community.

To summarize, we assert that when caring behavior is integrated into the organization, individuals can learn to move away from a focus on the self, through processes that encourage the development of this perspective. This positive feeling, in which the person who is giving to others actually benefits more from this altruistic behavior, relates to the principle of “helper therapy” (Riessman, 1965). Ronel et al. (2015) found that individuals who behave in a caring way towards others will experience positive emotions that further encourage such behavior. This creates a pattern of similar behaviors among people in other circles in the organization. This positive behavior of individuals reduces the tendency towards selfishness throughout the organization, and creates an educational culture with positive norms and values ​​that is strengthened through its “totality”. As a result, a holistic model is created that is larger than the sum of its parts, and every individual belonging to the organization adapts to it.

**Institutionalization Phase**

One way of assessing the degree to which a culture of caring has been successfully integrated into the organization is by considering the institutionalization of norms of behavior and social structures as permanent and stable over time. Another is the extent to which the changes made in the organization enable new courses of action to become an integral part of the school’s routine activities (Bryk, 2010). At the school investigated in the current study, caring behavior evolved from the proactive behavior of certain individuals towards a general pattern of behavior, driven by intrinsic motivation, reaching all of its members and causing them adopt this type of behavior. Borrowing a concept from the field of criminology, it is possible to understand the process in the organization under investigation as the opposite of the “criminal spin” (Ronel, 2011). The phenomenon of criminal spin describes the process a person undergoes from a committing a first criminal act to adopting a lifestyle of crime or deviant behavior. An individual is driven by a chain of behaviors, perceptions, desires, and emotions that work together, leading to a state in which that person become trapped within the process and loses control over his or her behaviors, feelings, and thoughts (Zemal et al., 2018). A negative spin within a group “infects” other group members, so that the group encourages the negative behavior and increases the involvement of all its members, to the point where the deviation becomes an accepted and legitimate social norm in the group (Ronel, 2011).

In contrast, in the organization examined in the present study, it appears that there was an inverse process of “positive spin”. In this type of spin, an individual’s subjective emotional experience becomes an internal motivating factor, as evidenced by narratives in interviews (e.g., “it gives me strength,” “it’s like beneficial bacteria”). The motivation to act in a caring way was described as “addictive” and “overwhelming,” and by using images such as “getting into the soul”, “like a drug” and “once you feel the initial feedback you can’t stop”. This positive spin allows individuals’ positive behaviors to become part of a system-wide, institutionalized culture based on perceptions, values, and a uniform language. This organizational process perpetuates and reinforces the positive culture by motivating individuals to continue to behave in a similar way. Moreover, the study demonstrated that the power and strength of the group is greater and more powerful than the total of the individuals in it. That is, expressions of caring in a school are more effective and efficient when they exist system-wide and as part of an organizational culture, rather than relying on the initiation of individuals. Support for this is seen in the paradigm that holds that in the interaction between the individual and a system, each part, component or individual affects the entire system and is affected by it. Therefore, the empowerment of the individual and the organization are interdependent and mutually empowering components (Erhard, 2008).

Finally, we note that (1970) Rosenhan described “caring” as behavior that is based on “normative altruism”, which is expressed in the ability to perceive reality from a perspective of empathy and sensitivity to the distress of others. Noddings (2008, 2010) defined two types of caring behavior. The first is natural caring, stemming from a spontaneous emotion of caring and accepting responsibility. The second is ethical caring that is based on a moral code and sense of duty, which result from cognitive decisions. Following this, it seems that the caring culture demonstrated in the case study is not based solely on pure altruism, but rather it is based mainly on normative altruism and the appropriate perspective. This makes it possible to respond to individuals’ personal needs, such as: self-efficacy, confidence, sense of capability, empowerment, belonging, ability to change, emotional satisfaction, and meaning.

The motivation to act in an ethical and altruistic way grows out of higher stages of morality, originating from a commitment to values that are enshrined in a social covenant. That is, the source of altruism is a desire to ensure that individuals are given their rights and that they receive the proper response to their needs, in a way that serves the good of society as a whole, rather than being driven by the definition of the “official” role of the teacher or staff member.

**Study Limitations**

The current study has a number of limitations. It examines a specific model at one primary school. Therefore, this model may have subjective and unique conditions or variables that cannot be isolated, and which influenced the nature of the findings. Another limitation is the inability to assess the change in relation to the previous culture, or to estimate the future outputs or the long-term institutionalization of the organizational culture. The study does not allow for a comparison between perceptions and behaviors within an organization that does not have an organizational culture such as the one demonstrated in this study.

Due to the limiting traits of this study, which examined a particular educational environment at a specific point in time, we recommend a longitudinal study that also examines the organization at a later point in time, in order to assess whether the culture has indeed been institutionalized and operates independent of personnel changes in the leadership. In addition, would be beneficial to re-examine the student population after they graduate, and assess the expected outputs among this population. We also recommend examining the model at another similar educational organization, or alternatively in a secondary school with adolescent students, and which has goals that prioritize academic achievement.

**Conclusions**

The integration and institutionalization of a culture of caring at this school is not based on the degree of inherent goodness among the people who work there. If this were the case, a caring pedagogy would only be manifest in certain, selective environments within the school, reflecting the degree of inherent kindness or altruism among the principals and teachers in those environments. On the contrary, for the system and the individuals in it, caring is a learned behavior that is strengthened and preserved over time through a process of “positive spin”. Accordingly, we argue that any prosocial and optimal environment with a normative and diverse social fabric has the potential to create, implement, and institutionalize a long-term culture of caring characterized by commitment to the organization and its values, and the benefits of which can be found in professional and research literature and educational practice. The principles that characterize this culture can be learned as an applied model, using internal strengths, and without the need for exorbitant external economic resources.

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