**Organizational Change in a School Reflecting a Perception of Values:**

**An Educational Vision for Institutionalizing a Culture of Caring**

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**Introduction**

Over the years, politicians and educational policymakers have proposed reforms to improve change processes in schools. However, change involves complex, difficult processes that people and organizational systems tend to avoid as much as possible (Oplatka, 2015). 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. Moreover, since teachers are accustomed to using certain methods, there are multiple challenges to correcting or modifying these methods, or encouraging teachers to utilize new, needs-appropriate ways of learning and teaching.

Cultural, social, organizational, and psychological barriers to change include: the complexity involved in change; teachers’ conservatism and resistance to change; poor management of change processes; gaps between policymakers and the educational world; and differences in perceptions of responsibility, required outputs, and indices of productivity. Furthermore, there is a gap between the “desirable” or “correct” educational approach teachers are asked to follow, and the nature of schools and the teaching profession. This gap limits teachers’ autonomy, flexibility, and creativity (Nir, 2017). Therefore, educational systems have continued to operate in a similar manner for many generations, despite numerous publicly- and privately-funded reforms and efforts to improve the system and its management (Cuban, 2013; Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu, 2013).

**A Positive Organizational Culture**

Organizational culture is defined as the set of explicit and implicit assumptions, expressions, symbols, values, beliefs, and social conventions shared by participants in various segments of the organization (Glisson & James, 2002; Samuel, 1990). According to Tzafroni (2008), an organization’s effectiveness and success are determined by three variables: adaptation to changing needs; organizational strength, as expressed in alignment between the organization’s declared values and their realization; and cooperative integration of the organizational culture at all levels, without creating subcultures. These variables affect the organization’s ability to delineate a direction, sense of meaning, and purpose to its members. A school’s climate is an outgrowth of the organizational culture, defined by the subjective perceptions held by individuals in the school towards its atmosphere, processes, and accepted behaviors. It significantly influences individuals’ sense of belonging to the educational framework, self-esteem, and behavior (Zullig et al., 2010).

An organization’s paradigm also significantly determines its nature. A prevalent paradigm focuses on the organization’s weaknesses and shortcomings. Conversely, a positive organizational paradigm enables its members to grow, thrive, and develop their strengths, and offers a sense of community, mutual connection, sense of meaning, purpose, and wellbeing (Karakas, 2010). The professional literature presents numerous theories regarding the impact of a positive environment on the optimal development of individuals. For example, Rogers (1969) argued that an environment allowing for positive interactions enables adaptation, self-fulfillment, freedom of choice, self-expression, and manifestation of personal skills. Similarly, Buber (1947) referred to an environment in which I-Thou relationships are based on connection, respect, addressing needs, and positive dialogue, which enable 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. Recent approaches in the fields of positive criminology and positive psychology also refer to positive environmental conditions that enable individuals to utilize their internal strengths 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 and Elisha 2010; Seligman 2019).

Correspondingly, an organizational environment characterized by a positive paradigm cultivates among its team members a belief in their own self-efficacy. This is achieved through processes of transfer of responsibility, delegation of authority, development of professional autonomy, and ongoing learning. These processes promote the assimilation of values, norms, and behaviors, and the design of the desired climate in a way that will enable its population to develop (Bass 1985; Diaz-Saenz 2011). This paradigm also relates to identifying driving forces and exploring the 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). Thus, this environment is characterized by positive processes and components such as higher levels of job satisfaction, motivation, and ability to perform the job (Arifin 2015).

**A Caring Culture in the School**

A positive culture at a school is based on prosocial and democratic values that are manifested, in practice, at the school. Such a culture is based on communication and ongoing dialogue between people in all parts of the educational institution, setting common goals, and responding to the cultural and social needs of its diverse student population (Gay 2018). Thus, a school climate characterized by openness, team spirit, involvement, satisfaction, sense of belonging, and viewing work as a positive challenge offers individuals positive experiences that contribute to their emotional wellbeing, reciprocal social support, self-confidence, motivation for learning, social engagement, and creative activity (Kutsyuruba et al. 2015).

One of the components of the positive culture in the school is empathic education, which emphasizes sensitivity and caring. This is expressed through the teaching methods, interpersonal relationships, assessment methods, and respect for the child’s personality (Oplatka 2017; Rogers 1977). According to Noddings (2008, 2010) “caring” is defined as committing to and taking responsibility for responding, in a practical and beneficial way, to the legitimate needs of others, while paying attention to the emotions and content that will help individuals develop and realize their potential. It is expressed in empathic behavior, acceptance and inclusion of differences, trust, respectful interpersonal relationships, sensitive and empowering dialogue, and satisfaction of needs.

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 to help shape the individual towards values and caring (Laor and Cohen 1993). Such a culture, present throughout the system, includes a commitment to prosocial and democratic values of justice, empathy, dialogue, consideration, and responsibility (Kaplan and Danino 2002). Previous studies have demonstrated the positive consequences of caring-based interventions in educational systems. For example, creation of a “caring community of learners” as part of a child development intervention program in elementary schools was correlated with positive outcomes such as a strong sense of community among students and greater consideration for others. In turn, these outcomes were associated with positive attitudes and feelings towards school and learning, intrinsic motivation, prosocial values and opinions, problem-solving skills, social adaptation, reduction of behavioral problems, and more (Solomon et al. 2000). Similarly, caring-based programs in elementary schools contribute to reducing violence, promoting mutual consideration among students without suppressing autonomy, and the internalization of caring values among teachers (Assor et al. 2018).

**Purpose of the Current Study**

The current study examines a school that successfully initiated and implemented a systemic and comprehensive change, using its own internal resources. It sheds light on the components in place at this school that enabled them to initiate organizational processes that produced a culture of caring, beneficial to all its members. The present study examines the perspectives, processes, and working methods at the school, and their impact.

**Methodology**

*Research Methods*

The current research was conducted according to a case study approach, based on the qualitative-phenomenological methodology. This methodology allows for research into real-world situations, not limited by conditions of control and inspection. Its comprehensive, rich, and in-depth processes are appropriate for the educational setting (Patton 1990). The researchers’ presence at the research site is not that of neutral observers. Rather, the researchers have practical and personal knowledge that influences their absorption and interpretation of the observed phenomena (Tzabar Ben-Yehoshua 1995).

*Research Participants*

This 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 acquaintance with it as having a positive and beneficial organizational culture. The school’s student population is diverse and includes, among others, at-risk children, students in special education classes, and students with special needs who are integrated into regular classes. The staff members are part of a heterogenous socio-cultural fabric: veterans and newcomers, from various religious streams, age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultures.

The study population of 35 participants was selected using intentional sampling of representatives from three groups: staff members (15), parents of students (10), and students (10). The 15 staff members held varying roles: principal, school counselor, six classroom teachers in various grades, two teachers of specialized subjects, a teaching assistant, head of the afternoon program, coordinator of advanced education, coordinator of special education, and school secretary.

*Research Tools*

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

Secondary research tools included observations of study participants, and collection of personal and organizational documents. Observations of participants were conducted during school activities such as plenary sessions, seminars, professional staff meetings, lessons, breaks between classes, parent meetings, and training sessions for parents. Relevant personal and organizational documents (e.g., minutes of meetings, students’ personal files, letters of appreciation about the school, and data on school efficiency and growth indices) were accessed in order to understand the organizational culture being studied and to expand the database for analysis and interpretation of the findings.

*Research Procedure*

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

Each interview session opened with an explanation of the research objective and process. All participants signed an informed consent form and were assured that the research would comply with the rules of ethics and confidentiality. Consent was also received from participating students’ parents. The interviews were recorded and notes were taken; the interviews were later transcribed. Data from the observations and collected documents were recorded in protocols or detailed field notes, to which comments and insights were added.

*Data Analysis*

The study used the qualitative content analysis model proposed by Shkedi (2003) to identify themes and categories, which are arranged into a narrative in the written research report. According to this approach, researchers attempt to reveal interviewees’ worldviews and practical knowledge, and rely on this for the data analysis (Connelly and Clandinin 1994). Analysis is based on an integrative method, which allows researchers to maintain the scientific and systematic nature of the research, while referring to the unique world of each participant (Shkedi 2003).

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

The fact that the lead researcher is a former staff member of the organization under investigation raises questions regarding her involvement as an “insider researcher.” Several processes were carried out in order to achieve a high level of internal validity and to maintain reliability: extended involvement of over ten months in the arena under investigation; triangulation; conducting interviews with three groups of participants with diverse characteristics; and use of observation and document analysis as secondary research tools. Furthermore, participants were invited to discuss any difficulties during their interview, to allow them to critique underlying and prior assumptions held by the researcher. The data were disclosed to the interviewees so they could correct or address the findings. The second author served as an external reader in the analysis of the collected data. Other aspects that helped prevent bias were the documentation and preservation of internal and external documents, recording and transcription 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 proper boundaries, respecting confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and adhering to all required rules of ethics.

**Results**

 The findings address the perceptions, principles, and ways of working in the school that enabled change in the realms of beliefs, behavior, and emotions. The findings also address the implications of the organizational culture for the individuals within it. The main findings from the interviews and the secondary research tools are presented using two key themes that emerged from the data analysis: a managerial strategy that prioritizes the wellbeing of individuals in the organization, and establishing a values-based caring approach.

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

The study found that the school principal’s approach and the corresponding policy in the organization place significant emphasis on promoting the mental wellbeing of the staff. To support this approach, the school has prioritized various processes intended to give the staff members a sense of wellbeing by responding optimally to their personal and professional needs. This is done through open dialogue, empowerment, partnership, 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 this included criticism or a request that a decision be changed. The school principal (referred to here as "S.") provided information, offered guidance, consulted with others, supported them, and enabled them to raise objections and give constructive 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 being negligent. I feel open and confident enough to tell her what I think.”*

Staff members’ sense of empowerment was perceived as a result of there being a response to their needs. This was a significant component in their sense of wellbeing. The interviewees indicated that empowerment took place through 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 trials that the staff put her through, she brought us to a place of excelling in 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 individuals and their ability to advance, identifying their personal and professional qualities, has given all staff members the opportunity to grow...”*

*“S. reached out to 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.”*

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-efficacy, satisfaction, and enjoyment of work. Staff members reported that these feelings motivated them to lead similar empowerment processes with their students and the parents:

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

The current study found that staff members were encouraged to be partners in system-wide processes such as budgetary decisions, integration of new employees, daily agenda issues, choosing professional training courses, and more.

*“S. gives people choices, allows them to take responsibility and see the big picture. She doesn’t do things instead of them but opens up opportunities, conveys her trust. Anyone who wants to be on a leadership team, can. It’s a choice.”*

Professionals who work at the school but are not employees of the Ministry of Education, such as assistants for special needs students and paramedical professionals, are perceived as an integral part of the staff. They are invited to take part in professional and social meetings, school seminars, and teachers’ committees. Participants reported that this sense of partnership enabled the development of a professional, committed, and empowered workforce that promotes the school and reduces resistance to change among its members. This partnership provided a sense of personal satisfaction, appreciation, capability, motivation, strengthening the interpersonal connection, and improving individuals’ sense of belonging to the organization.

Thus, the intuitive work of the staff has been replaced by inter-departmental meetings in which professionals from various fields are involved, such as the principal, school psychologist, educators, and classroom assistants. Meetings are scheduled with professionals from outside the school, 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 terms of achieving comprehensive and thorough thought processes, coming up with new ideas, assisting and monitoring the implementation of these ideas, establishing a common language among all professionals, and developing an interdisciplinary work plan. In addition, the school promotes a lifestyle of ongoing learning and professional development for all staff members in various areas relevant to the promotion of the educational approach, such as: learning disabilities, life skills, diversity, adapted learning, at-risk children, differential learning, alternative means of assessment, and more. The staff members reported that this promotes interpersonal communication and supportive processes in the organization. They described peer support among the staff members and assistance from professionals, in accordance with their needs in working with students. Support is provided individually or systemically, and may be focused and structured, or spread throughout the year. Mutual support and assistance were reported as keys to the staff members’ sense of belonging, capability, satisfaction, and job enjoyment:

*“They don’t say ‘we know best’. They’re always ready to learn, like a bottomless pit. They don’t wait until there are fires to put out 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 all leaders have the ability to go into a level of deep analysis. S. has the patience and the therapeutic and professional vision to sit with the staff.”*

*“There is no way that someone asks 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’re not alone.”*

*“There’s a sense of togetherness that’s created. There’s 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 separate 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. That way, the group of smokers could also be included. This is true for everyone.”*

The environment contributed to a family-like sense of social cohesion, despite the social and professional sub-groups. Participants described friendly interactions outside working hours, such as recreational days, birthday celebrations, and outings, including a trip abroad in which over 25 staff members participated. 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 up, talk. Only afterwards, I enter the classroom ... There’s 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 a given.”*

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

*“The standards at the school have changed. There isn’t anyone who does nothing. It is impossible not to do anything. 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 if the assistant cannot, 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 that you belong.”*

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

*Establishing a Values-Based Caring Approach*

Members of this organization demonstrate caring behavior characterized by mutual help, concern, and a values-based approach. This seen as a priority not only regarding the relations among the staff members, but for relations among all populations who are relevant to the organization: relations between the staff and parents, between 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 reaching and sweeping all of 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, she initiated processes of change. One teacher noted, *“There is a clear line between the leadership before S., and with her.”* 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 of values, who enables and facilitates dialogue. These qualities made them “follow her through fire and water”. Her position as a role model and her confidence in herself, in her chosen path, and in the staff and students, strengthened 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 [a student at the school] 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.”*

S. demonstrated a high level of motivation and leadership ability. She initiated changes such as opening special education classrooms. The school has received appreciation for its work and was awarded for its advanced pedagogy. It was visited by the President of Israel, the Minister of Education, and professionals from Israel and abroad, who came to observe its pedagogic model. Taken together, this created a change of perception and image at the school, which contributed to a sense of commitment, satisfaction, pride and appreciation towards the principal and the organization.

Professional training courses helped staff members connect to the guiding ideology and direction. For example, “Democracy” training was held in the teachers’ room once every two weeks for seven years, attended by the entire staff, 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 happen on its own. Everyone must be committed to it. It doesn’t grow itself. It needs to be watered. That is to say, there is no connection between people’s goodness 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 kind of 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.”*

This value-based approach has been systematically integrated into all layers of the organization. It is expressed in strong feelings of mutual support among *staff members*, as seen in the following statements:

*“I was with the class on an annual [sleepaway] 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, central, preliminary condition for learning. There was a perception that an effective learning process is not possible as long as a student is troubled by unmet needs at home, especially basic needs. Therefore, staff members took action to satisfy students’ needs, even though this is not defined as one of the stated roles of the educational organization. When a student’s parents have difficulty functioning, the staff feels strongly committed, like a family, and the perception of their responsibility is expanded. Various teachers said they make sandwiches for students at home, call to wake students for school, check on students during vacation, take students to mental healthcare sessions, and 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.”*

*“The girl [a student] knows that she can 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 can 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.

*"They’re like a father and mother. There is someone to worry about me, to give me advice or solutions. When my mother died, the school took care of me. I feel that people at this school love me."*

*"There [at another school] they gave up on me right away, they told me to get out of the school. This is the best school I have been to. The teachers and the kids treat you well, even if you don’t take your medication. Here, they understand you and don’t say '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, as well as 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, 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’ needs. Staff members visited a student’s home after a baby was born. Support for court expenses was provided when the government wanted to deport a child of foreign workers. A parents’ meeting was held at the home of a student whose mother was on maternity leave. Parents’ support groups were held on a monthly basis at a teacher’s home. 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:

*“I was having a hard time with my son, and in general… His teacher called me on her day off. She invited me to 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 for the parents, who have become partners in the caring attitude and behavior of the school. Multiple examples were raised. One mother volunteered for several hours each week in the secretarial office. A grandfather painted the school walls. Student welfare projects were organized, such as a movie club, renovations of the schoolrooms, a breakfast club, and making sandwiches for children during breaks. Parents raised money for needy families from donors inside and outside the school.

*“I feel like it gets into my soul. It takes over me. The satisfaction is incredible. 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 it is priceless. 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*. The findings show that the organization has various programs that encourage altruistic behavior towards the community, such as a weekly program for integrating 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. 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 the perceptions, processes, and approach of an educational organization that utilized its resources to successfully initiate and implement change processes that develop caring behaviors and promote emotional wellbeing for everyone in the organization. The findings indicate two main themes that deepen the 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 across the various layers of the organization. The outcome of these behaviors was that the staff members’ responsibility extended above and beyond traditional roles, out of a deep sense of commitment to the organization’s values.

The study shows the evolution of the school principal’s vision of creating an optimal educational environment that promotes a sense of wellbeing, to the degree that this became an inherent part of the organization’s “DNA”. This process addressed the goals, methods, and patterns of behavior that enabled the emergence of a fundamentally novel policy (Roffey 2017). The findings of this study are discussed below with respect 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 sense of identification of the members, and enable the development of norms reflecting the spirit of the place (Willis et al. 2016). Correspondingly, the study found that as soon as the school principal took on this position, she began to shape the norms of the organization. She initiated and led a distinctive approach that puts the wellbeing of the staff at the center, and she views this as a necessary condition for achieving the goals of the organization. According to this approach, if the staff “stands a quarter of a step above the students,” and feels satisfied and empowered, then the teachers and other school officials will be able to fulfill their duties and succeed in their work with even the most challenging students. It is important to note that there is widespread theoretical support for the importance of mental wellbeing among educational staff, and its implications for optimal work efficiency, improving the sense of competence, reducing burnout, and increasing satisfaction (e.g., Ainly and Carstens 2018; Zee and Koomen 2016). Previous studies have reported that teachers with a high level of commitment work harder than those with a low level of commitment and 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 and Varma 2016).

At the same time, there does not appear to be a structured pedagogical approach that defines the educational organization’s obligation to act in support of the wellbeing of the educational staff. This is left to the discretion and personal choice of the school principal. Moreover, in contrast to traditional education, in which the teacher was at the center, the prevailing current perception is that the child should be at the center, while the role of the teacher is defined as the mediator of knowledge (e.g., Heaysman and Tubin 2017). In this way, the importance of teachers in the learning process and their centrality in the educational organization actually decreases. Thus, the applied approach presented in this study is distinctive in its emphasis on the importance of broadly fulfilling the personal and professional needs of the educational staff. This approach led to the development of a positive climate in the school, expressed in feelings of cohesiveness and involvement among the staff. These feelings, in turn, allowed for the staff members to feel connected to the school’s vision.

*Implementation Phase*

A caring culture in the school is not only based on individuals’ goodwill and their choice to behave in a caring way over time. It also requires, as one of the teachers on the management team noted, “consistent work on the staff’s ability to do things better.” In line with this approach, processes were developed in the organization that reinforce the accompanying 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. It also contributes to professional development, a sense of commitment, and motivation for change (Zwart, Korthagen, and Attema-Noordewier 2015). The training courses offered in the studied organization were tailored to the needs of the staff, enabling the acquisition of knowledge and of professional and personal tools. Moreover, there was an emotional, values-based, and social learning process that allowed participants to address intrapersonal and interpersonal issues by raising objections, struggles, and difficulties. These learning processes foster consideration and thoughtfulness towards others, tolerance for disagreement, space for expression, a sense of meaning, belonging, and interdependence, and openness to hearing constructive criticism (Nelissen et al. 2017).

The implementation and assimilation of caring behavior that took place in this school is consistent with the model of Parke and Buriel (1998), according to which positive behavior will develop in an environment that allows for three conditions: direct learning, experience, 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 and Altamura 2011). As stated, it was found that in the researched school there was a direct, clear, and continuous reference to address conflicts and dilemmas for staff and students. The component of *experiential learning* is expressed in this organization through various routines of prosocial behaviors developed within the organization and outside it. When the environment transmits routines to individuals that support their contribution to others, they develop positive feelings, such as belonging, caring, pride, and meaning. This strengthens their motivation and willingness to continue to behave positively towards others, and to maintain and internalize the value of giving (Brooms 2019; Longobardi et al. 2016). Ronel and Segev (2014) add that when individuals are exposed to the suffering of others, and given the opportunity to act on social processes that are contrary to an egocentric perception of morality, they express caring behavior and emerge from their preoccupation with themselves. 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 of the organization.

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 benefits more from this altruistic behavior than the receiver does, relates to the principle of “helper therapy” (Riessman 1965). Ronel et al. (2015) found that individuals who behave in a caring way towards others experience positive emotions that encourage such behavior, creating a pattern of similar behaviors among people throughout 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*

The degree to which a culture of caring has been successfully integrated into the organization can be assessed by considering the institutionalization of norms of behavior and social structures as permanent and stable over time and the extent to which these changes 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 to 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 (Zemel 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 also 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. Moreover, as stated above, 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 system’s 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 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 is based mainly on normative altruism and the perception that this is the correct approach. This also makes it possible to fulfill some of the giver’s own 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 may have influenced the nature of the findings. Another limitation is the inability to assess the change in relation to the previous school culture, or to estimate the future outputs or the long-term institutionalization of the organizational culture. The study also 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 these constraints, 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, it 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, which has goals that prioritize academic achievement.

**Conclusions**

The integration and institutionalization of a culture of caring at the school examined in this study was 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 manifested in select school environments, reflecting the degree of inherent kindness or altruism of the principals and teachers in those environments. Rather, for the system and the individuals within it, caring is a learned behavior that is strengthened and preserved over time through a process of a “positive spin”. Accordingly, we argue that any prosocial 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, 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, based on internal strengths, and without the need for exorbitant external economic resources.

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