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Enhancing positive work relationships and the school environment:

An exploratory case study of teachers' emotions

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Abstract

The experience of work life is saturated with feelings or emotions (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). For humans, as with any social animals, our survival and day to day functioning rely heavily on the communication and perception of emotions (Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Zerbe, 2000b). When attention is paid to increasing awareness and understanding of emotion in our work lives, and how those emotions affect others, there is potential to improve interpersonal interactions and develop more positive, supportive work relationships. The work environment is largely dependent on the quality of these relationships and connections between organisational members (Carmeli, 2009).

Despite the centrality of work relationships within organisations, researchers are yet to fully understand the dynamics and the processes that nurture and sustain positive interpersonal relationships at work (Ragins & Dutton, 2007). Collegial relationships are particularly important in organisations such as schools, where the way that staff interact with one another not only affects their job performance and the quality of their work life, but also the lives and learning abilities of their students. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding how collegial interactions, relationships, and the school environment may change when staff are trained in emotional skills. This research was a smaller, parallel study contributing to a larger three year project – *Te Āniwaniwa: Warming up the Classroom Emotional Environment.* A mixed method approach utilised quantitative information from questionnaires to assess the school environment and morale, and qualitative information from weekly diaries of emotional interactions and semi-structured interviews.

All of the teaching and support staff from a local primary school attended workshops to enhance their emotional skills based on the Harvey-Evans (2003) model of the classroom emotional environment. Although statistical analyses were not sensitive enough to detect changes in quantitative data from questionnaires due to a small sample size (N=18), qualitative information collected from weekly diaries and interviews suggested that staff were noticing changes to their day to day interactions with one another and improvements to their professional relationships.

Interview themes highlighted some of the day to day behaviours and expectations that may be important in laying solid foundations on which positive relationships can be built. By delivering training to individuals within School A to enhance their emotional skills, this programme encouraging the development of an atmosphere where emotions could be expressed, understood and managed more effectively. The implications of these results are not necessarily restricted to management and staff relationships in schools but may also be extended to other occupational settings where individuals are required to support one another and share ideas and resources.

This paper is dedicated to my sister Catherine, whose spirit and love of life continue to inspire me in everything that I do.

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Foreword

How do you describe that feeling you get when you walk into a school? It's a feeling that sits deeper than just your awareness of the physical environment surrounding you. Do you feel warm and welcome, or does sense of isolation and coldness rest within you? Do the staff smile at you and greet you as they walk past? Do they smile and greet one another?

Just as our perceptions of the environment or climate shape the way we feel about being in a particular setting, staff perceptions of the environment in which they work affect the way they feel about their jobs. For teachers working in a school perceived as warm and accepting, may be more likely to have positive feelings about their jobs and the environment in which they work. This can have a tremendous positive influence on the lives and learning capabilities of the students they work with. In saying this, a school environment perceived as cold and unwelcoming, where teachers have negative feelings toward their jobs and the work environment may have a negative influence on their own wellbeing as well as that of their students. So how do you promote these positive feelings about the school environment?

This study contributes to a larger, three-year project- *Te Āniwaniwa*, which aimed to warm up the emotional climate in New Zealand primary school classrooms. As the project administrator and a research assistant for this project, I would often visit schools to administer questionnaires to students. Visiting various classrooms began to widen my eyes to the important influence that teachers' emotional skills and relationships can have on the lives of their students and the atmosphere of their classroom.

This project began in 2007 and the first year focused on developing a greater understanding of the classroom emotional climate. This involved collecting video footage of teachers who were identified as having a warm and sensitive teaching style. Video footage included examples of positive emotional interactions between the exemplar teachers and their students, as well as video taped interviews. In 2008,

we investigated whether the emotional interactions of teachers could be modified through professional development to enhance teachers' social-emotional skills in the classroom.

The question left to be answered by the third and final phase of the study was: If we really can warm up the classroom emotional climate, how will this benefit students? The aim the third phase of this study was to measure the relationship between teachers' emotional behaviour in the classroom and changes in students' emotional intelligence after teachers participated in an intervention aimed at their emotional behaviour in the classroom.

Feedback from the 2008 teacher participants of the professional development workshops had been very positive, with many wanting more! A number of teachers asked for an opportunity to be involved with continuous training and development-wanting to sustain the positive changes they had made to their classrooms and their relationships with their students. It became apparent that if we wanted to make sustainable changes to students, teachers, and the classrooms they work in, teachers would need to be surrounded by an environment within their school that supported their growth and development, one in which teachers' development was promoted by the support of their peers and leadership. This led us to the idea of a whole school approach to professional development, where all teaching and support staff, including the principal, would be involved in a programme designed to promote a supportive and positive school environment.

In collaboration with a local primary school led by a senior management team who shared our beliefs, we developed a whole school approach to the intervention that would involve all teaching and support staff at the school, focusing both at a school wide and individual classroom level of change. With a keen interest in the area of organisational psychology, I became interested in how developing the emotional skills of this group might affect the interpersonal relationships between the staff, how they felt about their jobs, and the school organisational climate.

Many people spend most of their day at work and the work environment can impact motivation, behaviour, development and performance (Carmeli, 2009). Teachers may not spend as much time interacting with their co-workers as individuals in some other types of organisations because they work mostly in their own classroom with their students alone. However, teachers need to be able to cooperate and support one another in what can be an emotionally exhausting job. How they interact with each other affects not only their own work life, but the lives and learning abilities of the students they teach. These interactions contribute to the development of working relationships that play an integral role in the perceptions of the organisational environment and a number of organisational processes. This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding how these relationships and the school environment may change when all teaching and support staff are trained in emotional skills.