
Professional well-being and learning: a study of teacher-peer workplace relationships

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Introduction

This is a companion article to an earlier one in *JEE* (Butt and Retallick 2002) which focused on administrator-teacher workplace relationships in relation to professional well-being and learning. Whilst retaining the inquiry theme of professional well-being and learning, here we shift the focus of the data analysis to the workplace relationships of teachers and their peers. This focus is significant in the context of increasing interest in collaboration amongst teachers as a key source of their professional learning, along with widespread moves to rethink the nature of schools as learning communities where workplace relationships based on collegiality and trust, rather than hierarchy, are paramount (eg Mitchell & Sackney 2000; Retallick *et al* 1999; Sackney 2003).

The major purpose of this article, then, is to portray the essential structures and processes (see Polkinghorne 1983) of teachers' experiences of work-life relationships with their fellow teachers. Themes discerned from the interpretation of autobiographical data taken from teachers' professional life stories with regard to positive and negative relationships were used to identify what collegial initiatives and actions are perceived by teachers to lead to professional well-being and productive learning in the workplace. In this article, we have investigated the most predominant meta-theme which appeared in the data in relation to teachers' sense of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their work lives – that of intercollegial relationships.

As details of the methodology were provided in the earlier article, it will not be necessary to recount them here. In brief, therefore, for this and the previous study, teachers responded in writing to the invitation to express a variety of feelings with regard to their work lives, depict events which gave rise to those feelings, and reflect on why they felt that way. This provided a portrayal of what this group of teachers found satisfying and dissatisfying about their working realities. The autobiographical data was gathered from 29 teachers in Canadian schools during one year in the late 1990s and validated by a group of 20 teachers in the year 2000. Seventeen of the 29 were working in elementary schools and 12 were working in grades 7–12. Twelve teachers were female and 17 were male.

Results

Regarding relationships with their peers, 49% of teachers' comments were negative and 51% were positive (this compares with 43% and 57% respectively in the earlier teacher-administrator study). In an attempt to assess the satisfaction/dissatisfaction balance with respect to peer relationships by individual, the data was categorised three ways: mostly (>50%) positive comments; mostly negative; and equally positive and negative (41%, 31% and 28% respectively). In the earlier study the results were 24%, 38% and 38% respectively. This suggests that teachers' relationships with their peers are perceived to be more positive than with their administrators.

For analysis of the qualitative data and to enable comparisons to be made, we used the same three broad themes as in the earlier study, although there were variations in the sub-themes. The first theme, 'Climate', related to teachers' experiences of the general context within which they work. The second theme, 'Collegial communication', related to a generic and generative set of processes of verbal interaction between peers. A third theme, 'Facilitating workplace learning and teacher development', related to experiences of particular events of a substantive nature that focused on individual and collective professional learning. Data analysis revealed positive and negative aspects of the three major themes and both will be presented in the following sections.

Positive climate

According to teachers who perceived their relationships with their peers as positive, the working context is best described by the pervasive theme of 'Positive climate', characterised by the combined nature of the four sub-themes of 'Collegial support', 'Recognition, respect and trust', 'Mutual caring', and 'Social cohesiveness'. The first three sub-themes are similar to those manifest in teachers' perceptions of teacher-administrator relations reported in the earlier article, whereas the fourth sub-theme is not evident in that data.

Collegial support

The following excerpts from teachers' stories illustrate the sub-theme of support.

We were very fortunate ... (at our school) ... to have quite a supportive staff, many of whom remained for more than one year.

Reminiscing, one individual describes one of his happiest school experiences in which the community was 'responsive and helpful'. The students were 'well behaved and interested in school' and 'the staff were working energetically and enthusiastically'.

I have also been influenced by colleagues [Lists names of specific individuals] ... – all have had a great impact on my attitude towards children and curriculum.

We [colleagues] became fast friends and found we could share our materials.

I feel fortunate to be a member of a staff where interpersonal relationships are strong, and where cooperation is therefore a way of life.

... teachers are a source of satisfaction also. Each year I've been very close with a next-door teacher. I think the physical proximity leads to these close relationships or facilitates them.

The dialogue with other teachers reinforced many of my practices in the classroom ... I began to feel confident that I was just as good as the city teachers.

One teacher, who was at one time frustrated with having to take on the majority of extra-curricular responsibilities, has noted a change in many of her peers. They are beginning to take on some of these activities. She stated:

It is comforting to experience four years later that I am still involved in many activities but I have stopped taking the leading role and began considering what I need. The staff members ... have experienced the need for extra-curricular activities and have been willing to accept responsibilities, making the role of each of the staff members a sharing, cooperating team that tries to meet the needs of the students.

Recognition, respect and trust

Teachers expressed very positive feelings about their experiences of peer recognition, respect and trust.

One further advantage of major importance to my pedagogy is a progressive [principal and] staff, who are willing to trust my professional judgement on many pedagogical issues that affect them and some of the children they teach. This has had an inestimable effect on my own self-concept (after some experiences of a contrary nature) and has had a positive effect on my creativity in the classroom.

I've held this teaching position for almost four years now and I feel that I'm doing a good job. I think that, by and large, I'm liked and respected by my colleagues and I enjoy their company, which makes going to work every day a lot easier.

Teacher "X" would often sing my praises to others and support my ideas at staff meetings as well as share materials and ideas. I admit that I enjoyed that.

Mutual caring

The notions of support and respect carry through into a sense of mutual caring which builds a personal and emotional bond of belonging.

You couldn't find a more helpful staff. The atmosphere in the school is very positive. Outsiders like to visit it because it seems such a happy place for people to be and everyone in the school does look happy.

I really enjoy the staff I teach with, we give each other a lot of moral support. Our staffroom, which is used by teachers, custodian, secretaries, aids and administrators, is a very pleasant place.

... my colleague and I had a similar philosophy. Our relationship was very special – we energized each other. The three years we taught together were my happiest three years of teaching. After she left on a maternity leave I felt extremely isolated – I no longer had a sounding board and the responsibility of being solely in charge of the (science) program of the school weighed heavily on my shoulders.

Social cohesiveness

Support, respect and mutual caring is enhanced by social interaction both in and outside of school.

I usually go to the staffroom after school to get caught up on the latest gossip. Four of us usually play cribbage after school until about four-thirty. A lot of Fridays some of us go to the Legion for a few drinks.

The staff mixed very well both in and out of school. Social functions were well patronized and we frequently visited each other on the weekends.

We had a great group of socializers. We usually got together on Fridays after school, either at one of the staff member's home or at one of our favorite spots in town. These have been one of the happiest times. At these occasions we were able to air our feelings about school, etc.

I felt a tremendous satisfaction in returning to the elementary school, in working with a delightful group of children, and a teaching staff who combined a sense of commitment with a sense of humor. Great fun!

Collegial communication

The second major theme, ‘Collegial communication’, was relatively easy to discern as a separate theme in the data related to teachers’ perceptions of relationships with administrators. At first it appeared absent from our data on peer relations, however, on re-examination, collegial communication was richly present but embedded and integrated within data for other themes. For the purpose of displaying this data here, some excerpts are presented in *italics* to illustrate the embedded nature of the communication.

I go back to my room and stand outside leaning against the end of the open door, and *chat with the other teachers*. Four classroom doors open onto our end of the hall and before school starts and at recesses we often hold up our doors and natter.

Another aspect . . . I enjoyed was occupying an office near some interesting and effective instructors. Because they were working in a variety of different fields, *I was able to get their impressions and points of view on what I was doing without having to be answerable to them in what I decided to follow through on . . .* It had the advantage of being private as well if you wanted to keep the conversations that way.

The coffee table tended to draw specific people at specific times, so that you could almost say it formed the community of sorts. It was a place where you didn’t have to prove anything; you just belonged because you were an instructor. *It was a social place, where you shared one another’s sorrows and successes. It was also a place where you could project ideas and get some sort of feedback on them.* And also, it was a place where you could get informal reflection on what was happening in your classes that others had heard about.

In reflecting upon why there is a difference between the degree of embeddedness of collegial communication in data on peers in comparison with that on administrative relations, the functional workplace separation of the administrator and the differential in social, professional and administrative status would likely entail that administrator-teacher communication would be less embedded. Conversely, communication among peers – who function within little differentiation of social or professional status, in close workplace proximity – is more likely to be collegial and embedded within workplace interactions.

Facilitating workplace learning and teacher development

The context of ‘Positive climate’ and the process of ‘Collegial communication’ are carried through into the substance of professional growth in relation to the third major theme – ‘Facilitating workplace learning and teacher development’. The notion of workplace learning is used because these incidents of peer-supported professional growth were not related to formal professional development activities, but arose from day-to-day workplace interactions (see Retallick 1999). This theme is similar to one that

emerged from the data on administrator relations, but there are some differences within sub-themes. There is less of a focus on 'career development' and a wider variety of peer-oriented professional learning strategies evident in the sub-themes of 'Apprentice/coach', 'Collegial mentor', 'Observation of role models', 'Work teams', 'Action research', 'Critical friend' and 'Collegial problem solving in dealing with difficulty'.

Apprentice/coach

There was another teacher at [named school] who was a cartographer and used maps and map interpretation in his Social Studies classes. This led me to more or less do a mini apprenticeship with this teacher in my spare time.

Teaching a new course is not easy. Having access to an approachable teacher who is already teaching in the program can make all the difference. One teacher gratefully acknowledges the openness of a colleague who had actually developed the program he was to be teaching.

Since the program had been under the control and development of the person who taught the other ... class, she took a great deal of interest in what I was doing with my students. We had frequent conferences about the classes, and she gave me a number of suggestions of how I might get started and also how I might correct certain problems.

Collegial mentor

Fortunately there was another teacher on staff, with whom I became very close. She was my steelage! Having had only one year's experience, she still remembered what it was like to be starting out, but had, in that year, worked out her own way of teaching. She gave me the direction I needed and also showed me that it was all right not to be perfect.

Working with other teachers adds a new perspective and enriches curricula while fostering positive working relations.

When I was transferred to the school in town I met two teachers from England who had the kinds of classrooms that I wanted to have. The classes were well run, with a sense of dignity and quiet and the students were doing individual work with intensity, concentration and creativity. I talked with them a lot and tried introducing bits of that philosophy into my classroom. It was years later in a different school that I felt I have achieved this goal with an individualized reading program in my third-grade class.

Observation of role models

Another teacher had an opportunity to observe classroom instruction by individuals whom she identified as some of 'the best teachers and researchers' in her specialty. She

found it rewarding to have the opportunity to observe the same individuals who were developing curricula and teaching strategies in her area.

It was wonderful to see those teachers conducting their classes so successfully and to see those children participating so willingly and with such happiness.

It wasn't until my first teaching position ... that I had someone to emulate. Unfortunately I was unable to observe him teach, but his knowledge of [the subject area] and his rapport with his students was such that I knew I wanted to be like him.

I had watched her teach and had her as a role model, and I tried to emulate her every action. Even today, after teaching for nine years, I still find myself saying, "How would Miss Wickham approach this problem?" when I am puzzled regarding some presentation method, etc. She stressed excellence and perfection in everything she did, but she still taught me of a student's individual differences and abilities and how to encourage without ruining their self-worth.

Work teams

Working in teams was an important source of professional learning for the teachers.

The other grade two teachers offered everything from advice to teacher materials. This was very helpful and they respected the decisions I made regarding their advice and materials as to whether I made use of the teaching strategy or not.

Through the development of the specific objectives, classroom teachers met in order to come to a consensus of what should be taught at each grade level and what level of competency. This learning atmosphere was an invigorating experience.

I was teamed with three other Grade 5 teaches and for the first time I found out just how much fun teaching could be. The four of us became good friends as well as a strong support system for one another. We planned units of study, common evaluation instruments and procedures, and common expectations. I was no longer isolated. Instead I had opportunities for professional development built into my daily work routine. I learned a great deal from my colleagues and I also found out for the first time that many of my own practices were acceptable and useable to others and that was reassuring.

Since we were the only two instructors it was our territory. We understood one another's work. We had a certain amount of pride in our territory, especially when other instructors indicated that they would not want to be working with the students we had.

A teacher expressed concern initially about sharing materials with his colleagues, but after making the decision to do so he stated that:

I found I could work with [my colleagues] and their approaches often added new and interesting perspectives to courses. We all learned and expanded our backgrounds.

Action research

Teachers trying out new ideas in a systematic way moves professional learning into action research.

I had two friends who were teachers involved in the pedagogical research and who were associated in their work with a pedagogical counsellor. We had many opportunities to meet, to share experiences, readings and ideas. We discussed the curricula. We organized model lessons that were given with groups of children trying out new techniques or strategies.

Critical friend

As one teacher discovered, friendly, philosophical ‘sparing’ can be a stimulating experience. The following excerpt demonstrates the concept of a critical friend in action.

We often argued (in the true sense of the word) about education – often seeking one another out as sounding boards. He shared his ideas and books on open education, non-graded schooling and politics in the classroom. He also gave me the final push to go back to night school and finish my BEd. Because of him I have become a much more critical thinker; one who is better equipped to argue from fact rather than just emotion.

Collegial problem solving in dealing with difficulty

Teachers who were satisfied with their work relations with peers also reported collegial support in the resolution of difficulties.

We [colleagues] discuss those things that directly concern us and we come up with ideas and solutions.

I met often with staff that taught the same grade level and subjects to discuss course materials, tests and concerns. This always made me feel happy and content knowing that other people were experiencing the same things I was.

No problem is too small or too big for them to solve. They bend over backwards to help people with problems of a pedagogical or curricular nature.

Another teacher relates a difficult situation concerning a bright, but emotionally disturbed student. He credits much of his coping skills to the suggestions emerging from the conversations he had with his colleagues.

I was thankful for other instructors who had worked with her as well because they gave me a more balanced view of what was happening. After that, I distanced myself from my students a bit more. I became more involved in the life of the [school] as well, instead of making the classroom my whole sphere of interest.

Negative climate

In contrast to the positive themes in the previous section, data from teachers who experienced negative relationships with their peers revealed the polar opposite major themes of 'Negative climate', 'Lack of (or poor) communication' and 'Lack of facilitation of workplace learning and teacher development'.

The working context of 'Negative climate' is characterised by the sub-themes of 'Lack of support', 'Lack of recognition, respect and trust', 'Lack of mutual caring' and 'Lack of social cohesiveness'.

Lack of support

Lack of support impacts climate and perceived effectiveness through negativism, conflict, formation of cliques and balkanisation.

Even though it may seem that inter-personal relationships with your principal and colleagues are not too important and that they shouldn't affect the teaching in your individual classrooms, I feel that it did affect my attitude and approach to teaching in my first year of teaching, at least. I have always enjoyed a good sense of humour and enjoy sharing that attitude and atmosphere with others around whom I work. I found a definite lacking of this positive enthusiastic atmosphere at our school.

There was constant negativism abounding in the staff-room conversations, both about students and fellow teachers, to the point that I started staying in my room rather than mixing with the other teachers.

There were definitely feelings of internal hostility and resentment towards the administration, as well as some other inter-staff personal conflicts. The nucleus of the fault-finders involved about seven of the teaching staff, but several of these had seniority ranking and carried a lot of influence regarding staff rapport.

On other occasions I have been unhappy with peers. These are the people who feel they are the only "professionals" within the school and are very quick to criticize their peers.

Lack of recognition, respect and trust

... it seems to me that there is a very high level of distrust among our staff members. Lack of collegial support, creating petty issues, snubbing one another, and being overtly uncooperative, as well as ongoing bitching and griping about other staff members, are just some of the aggravations which I feel daily.

Once in a while I ask advice on a question, like what did you do with so and so to get him to work for you? They (colleagues) usually say something that I've already tried and it didn't work for me. Nobody has any real or long-lasting answers. Nobody really seems to know anything very substantial. I think it is maybe there isn't anything very substantial to be known. It's hard to say. What I mean is, the guys at the high school who end up with

their masters degrees and extra pay don't seem to be any better able to answer concerns than us other flunkies, and they're not any wiser than good parents with no university training.

... there are a few teachers who resent my small class size, additional preparation/administrative time, my involvement in a number of areas that provide additional release time, and my enthusiasm for what I do. These teachers want no part of anything that would make more work for them.

One lady went to a three-day workshop on brain hemispheres. She gave a forty-minute discourse in the subsequent staff meeting. I have been in a master's program for nearly a year and not one person has asked me what my thing is.

A teacher received an international award that was virtually ignored by his school.

The final irony was that, except for a few brief comments from two or three colleagues, there was no local school recognition of the achievement.

Lack of mutual caring

Lack of caring manifests itself in a number of ways, including interruptions; taking advantage and letting a few do all the work; and derisory attitudes towards students.

This year, while nervously putting together a production of *The Glass Menagerie*, I got sick of the gym teachers coming up to me and asking me to let them bounce basketballs in the gym during my rehearsals . . .

Classroom interruptions can be a major source of frustration. In this case, the central location of the teacher's classroom complicates the issue.

It is not unusual to count twenty or more interruptions in an hour. Teachers going in and out for no valid reasons, students taking trips to the bathroom, etc.

This teacher outlines points in a 'pet peeve' fashion and states:

... teachers who rely on my file for everything and never contribute to it. The file was designed for common use in the hopes that "two or more heads are better than one" – this was never practiced.

Probably the first thing on my list of "changes" is I'm going to have to learn how to say "No! ... don't mind doing someone a favour once in a while, but I think that everyone thinks I'm the "Good Humour Man" the way they have "dumped" on me lately.

The following excerpt is from a teacher who is frustrated with a colleague's negative attitude towards a group of students, who in her opinion have been too easily labelled 'low achievers' and 'troublemakers.'

Her . . . decision about my students has led her to drastically alter not only what she teaches but how much effort she personally puts into the time she has with them. After all, she believes very little can be done to save them. Therefore my class spends a lot of time cleaning up their desks and the area, colouring and visiting while Teacher “X” is supposed to be teaching them . . . She is so sure that my students will not have a chance in the future for success since their “genes” have already determined their failure. She pokes fun at their poor grammar and communication skills. She hopes the girls in my class will remain neat since this will help them marry well. I feel sick. I want to get my students away from her.

Discouraged by the negative attitude of colleagues towards her class, this teacher states:

I start avoiding certain staff members by skipping recess in the staffroom or carefully selecting my seating on other occasions. I desire hearing something good about my students. Occasionally I get trapped by staff members who have a discouraging effect upon me. Some are so negative about my students and they seem to enjoy trying to outdo one another with horror stories of teaching them. By the time I get away from them I feel so weighed down.

Lack of social cohesiveness

A lack of social cohesiveness is illustrated by this excerpt.

. . . when it comes to a social life outside school, apathy and lack of interest come to the fore. This is a staff that does not want to mix socially. We used to go to the bar almost every Friday afternoon and I remember occasions when my bike had to be put into one of the teacher’s trucks . . . because they doubted I’d make it home.

A sense of fond nostalgia is evident in the previous excerpt. Obviously, social interaction with peers is very important to this teacher. It is echoed again below.

We’ve organized parties and social gatherings, but these are always poorly attended, with some individuals blatantly refusing to attend. We’ve even approached the problem head-on, and solicited inputs from the staff as a whole, but to no avail.

I have to admit that the staff as a whole does not mix well socially – they are mainly very conservative and simply don’t approve of partying.

On the other hand, the opposite of “forced” socialisation doesn’t work for some.

I tell the groupies don’t tell me I have to participate and I won’t tell you that you must not. My motto is live and let live. Don’t bug me and I won’t bug you. Invite me in on decision making if you want and I will live by the majority voice, but don’t come to me with a decision in the bag from a crew of nattering ninnies and expect me to jump for joy.

Lack of (or poor) communication

For the second major theme 'Lack of (or poor) communication', teachers described their experiences as follows.

I don't say much of any substance to most other teachers. I find that no two teachers are alike and each one feels like his or her way is pretty good and that they are not interested in any big advice.

Useless discussion and endless dialogue in prolonged meetings.

I also find most staffroom conversations boring and time consuming.

. . . one of the primary reasons that I chose teaching was because I particularly enjoyed the social interactions and the intellectual sharing which I felt as a student, and I hoped to maintain these virtues as a teacher. Unfortunately, as a teacher, I discovered that the overwhelming preponderance of these actions occur between the teacher and the students, or the students themselves, while there is very little of this intellectual and social stimulation between teachers, though this may be especially true in my current teaching situation.

I feel lonely when I am standing in the hall with the others making small talk. I crave a challenging conversation.

But I do feel ignored and lonely. I notice that most of my job dissatisfaction comes from adult interactions. I feel bored because the adults talk about useless topics.

What amazes me most is the petty points which emerge as issues in staff meetings. So far in nine years we have never dealt with principles of effective teaching. It really gripes my gizzard.

There seemed to be little opportunity for real dialogue between teachers; this particular year was definitely the low point in my career, to the point where I was seriously considering leaving the profession, and had investigated alternatives such as real estate.

Lack of facilitating workplace learning and teacher development

In comparison to teachers who perceived peer relations as positive, those who had negative perceptions of peer relations did not experience much support from their peers with regard to their professional learning and development. The polar opposite theme of 'Lack of facilitating workplace learning and teacher development' was characterised by the sub-themes of 'Lack of cooperation' and 'Dysfunctional teams'.

Lack of cooperation

Conflict and competitiveness seem to pervade the data where lack of cooperation is evident.

Although we had similar goals, philosophies, and methodology, we found that we were also highly competitive (a fact that we did not acknowledge until several years later when we had both moved on to other placements).

A switch from elementary to junior high was a traumatic experience for one teacher. She states:

We didn't share the same ideas about kids, how they should behave, what expectations were reasonable for their performance, how their work should be evaluated or how the job of teaching could be shared.

In relating a situation in which a student who was demonstrating a marked improvement was to be evaluated for either promotion or retention, a resource room teacher expresses frustration at the close-minded approach of the teacher.

What particularly distressed me was that the classroom teacher told me throughout the process that "X" shouldn't have passed Grade 1 and she would have to repeat Grade 2. She really never considered that "X" might make sufficient progress to enable her to continue on.

The following excerpt is from a resource teacher who is involved in assisting teachers with curriculum enrichment. She states:

One teacher ... has been extraordinarily difficult to work with. She is convinced that what she is doing with these students is more than they can handle. Everything this teacher does in the classroom is so important that the students can't afford to miss a second of it ... memory training seems to be valued by this teacher. The students aren't happy either. I become so furious when I talk with this teacher that one day I'll explode.

A major consequence of the disparity between my colleague's and my philosophy of education is that my students also believe, through no prompting on my part, her class to be "sluff" or "Mickey-Mouse", and are further discouraged from motivating themselves in my classroom, ultimately making my teaching situation more difficult than it already is.

Dysfunctional teams

A teacher relates a disappointing experience with three teachers at her grade level:

One of these teachers usually did her own thing without consulting anyone, while the other two teachers were like two peas in a pod. They were very critical and demanding, which made me feel somewhat defensive.

... the teachers would meet in grade level groups to discuss testing implements, upcoming events or special programs. Teacher X was very set in her ways. As she always liked to put it, "I'm very experienced, you know". During our initial meetings, Teacher X, Y (the other grade teacher) and I got along quite amicably. However, one thing was wrong – Mrs. X seemed to be dominating the meetings and my suggestions counted for very little. In fact, whenever I suggested a new or interesting (in my opinion) way to handle problems or impending situations, she would cross her arms and state emphatically and in a condescending tone of voice, one of her patented retorts – "I've tried that before and it doesn't work. Too much time and energy required. No way!" ... and finally the ultimate putdown – "You're just a pup. I guess you'll just have to learn the hard way!"

I think ... the other aspect of building up credits to move up the administrative ladder – that really bothers me. I realize that we all must "pay our dues" in one way or another, but many people join countless numbers of committees to tag on these credits and do very little to help in the committee. This is what I like to call the "Toupee Syndrome". Toupees leave a false impression where people are made to believe there is some growth.

Conclusion

Teacher work satisfaction derives, to a major extent, from positive workplace relationships. Healthy peer intercollegial relations are characterised by a significant opportunity for interactions amongst professional colleagues who help and support each other in relationships not characterized by status differentiation due to seniority, gender, subject or balkanised cliques. Peers, through positive encouragement, support, sharing, recognition, trust, respect and mutual caring for each other, create a positive intercollegial climate. Communication among peers is fluid, continuous, informal and embedded in rich workplace interaction and learning.

Within the context of a positive climate and the process of intercollegial communications embedded in the workplace, teachers felt comfortable seeking professional help from their peers, who were able to respond to substantive workplace learning and teacher development needs through coaching, mentoring, being role models for observation, effective work teams, action research, critical dialogue and collegial problem solving. When seen together, these sorts of attitudes, values, behaviours, interactions and processes characterise teachers as being prepared to initiate their own professional learning – not in an isolated way, but with the collaboration and active help of their peers, in mutually beneficial and reciprocal ways.

From the data, the impact of collegiality and self-initiated peer-assisted teacher learning creates – and is created by – an open, supportive climate, social intimacy and facilitated workplace learning, so that both social and professional needs are met. This results in a good level of job satisfaction, commitment and positive attitudes towards students, teaching, learning and one's peers. Teachers felt free to help and be helped by their peers, and this caring atmosphere assisted them to engage the development of their teaching skills and face the more sensitive challenges of resolving difficulties.

In contrast, teachers' work dissatisfaction derives, to a major extent, from negative intercollegial relations. The data from teachers who perceived their interactions with their peers to be negative painted a picture of peer separation and lack of collegiality leading to a lack of mutual support, negativism (and sometimes hostility), trust, respect, recognition and mutual caring. Lack of (or poor) communication contributed to, and resulted from, this type of professional fragmentation. This also led to a lack of cooperation and to conflict, competitiveness, dysfunction and perpetuation of professional interactions that hinder, rather than help, workplace learning, teacher development and resolution of difficulty. In these situations, school staffs are more likely to be characterised by dysfunctional status differentiation due to seniority, gender, subject or professional cliques; and by balkanisation, where power is abused and not shared.

An important implication of this study is that initiating a continuing focus on teacher well-being might be the best way to provide fertile ground for teacher development and assist them to avoid burn-out. Being an active, professional learner within a context of support from one's peers appears to be related to job satisfaction and student success in schools. This study suggests, however, that many schools and teachers do not experience intercollegial relationships that are sufficiently healthy.

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