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PREVENTING TEACHERS' DROPOUT THROUGH IMPROVING
ATMOSPHERE IN SCHOOLS FOR YOUTH AT RISK

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Abstract

Teachers' dropout transpires at high rates in many worldwide education systems. Numerous studies have explored this occurrence at schools in general and have not focused on dropout of teachers for at-risk youth. This paper discusses the relation between school atmosphere and dropout of teachers in schools for at-risk youth. Findings illustrate that the school atmosphere has a considerable weight in the decisions made by teachers in schools for at-risk youth whether to continue teaching. This paper explores this research question by a qualitative research of teachers and principals of at-risk youth. The study is based on interviews conducted with teachers and principals in schools for at-risk youth, according to the following distribution: five persevering teachers, five principals and four dropout teachers from school for at-risk youth. The findings obtained from the interviews comply with the research questions, illustrating that the school atmosphere is essential in the context of dropout of teachers in schools for at-risk youth. The interviewees refer to three main features associated with the school atmosphere: sense of belonging, perception of school as a "home" and a "family" and collaboration. The school atmosphere is greatly important in the integration of teachers in schools for at-risk youth. Moreover, it is vital for the success of at-risk students. This is due to the fact that the way teachers feel at school affects the teaching level in class. Hence, it affects the general functioning of the school which, in its turn, has an impact on teachers' working conditions.

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Keywords: Teacher dropout, school atmosphere, at-risk youth, schools for at-risk youth.



1. Introduction

Dropout from the teaching profession is a social phenomenon that is increasingly growing in various countries of the western world, mainly in the last two decades. This phenomenon has even won the title “The revolving door”, since about one third of the teachers, mainly novice teachers, are constantly moving between schools or are in the process of abandoning the profession for reasons other than retirement (Ingersoll, 2001). The professional literature explores teachers’ dropout within the framework of turnover rates in the education system. Mobility refers to the annual rates of teachers who leave their work in an educational institute (Macdonald, 1999). As far as the term “teachers’ dropout” is concerned, researchers distinguish between dropout and immigration. Dropout is defined as leaving the teaching profession not due to retirement (Ingersoll, 2001) for good or temporarily, namely teachers choose to re-engage in teaching after abandoning the profession for a certain period of time. In the annual report of dropout rates, it is difficult to distinguish between permanent and temporary dropout, since the latter becomes obvious only after a certain period of time. Consequently, the authorities publish the data without distinguishing between temporary and permanent dropout. Immigration relates to the transition between educational institutions in the same district or in another district, so that teachers continue engaging in the teaching profession (Ingersoll, 2001).

Teachers’ dropout entails severe problems in the way school conducts itself:

- Lack of teachers and turnover that creates organizational problems. Sometimes, principals find it difficult to fill a position of a teacher who has left school. This obliges them to adopt measures that undermine the quality of learning, such as increasing the number of pupils in class or hiring teachers who have not been adequately qualified (Changying, 2007; Liu & Meyer, 2005).
- Loss of human capital (Ingersoll & May, 2012), manifested for example by loss of pedagogical and didactic knowledge (Ewing & Smith, 2003).
- Loss of social capital, following the state’s investment in teacher education processes.
- Undermining the work of the teaching staff at school (Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006) since it has a negative effect on the pupils’ attainments (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013) and disrupting the interrelations between the pupils and the teachers (Liu & Meyer, 2005).

Figure 1 presents the main reasons for teachers’ dropout, as discussed in the professional literature.

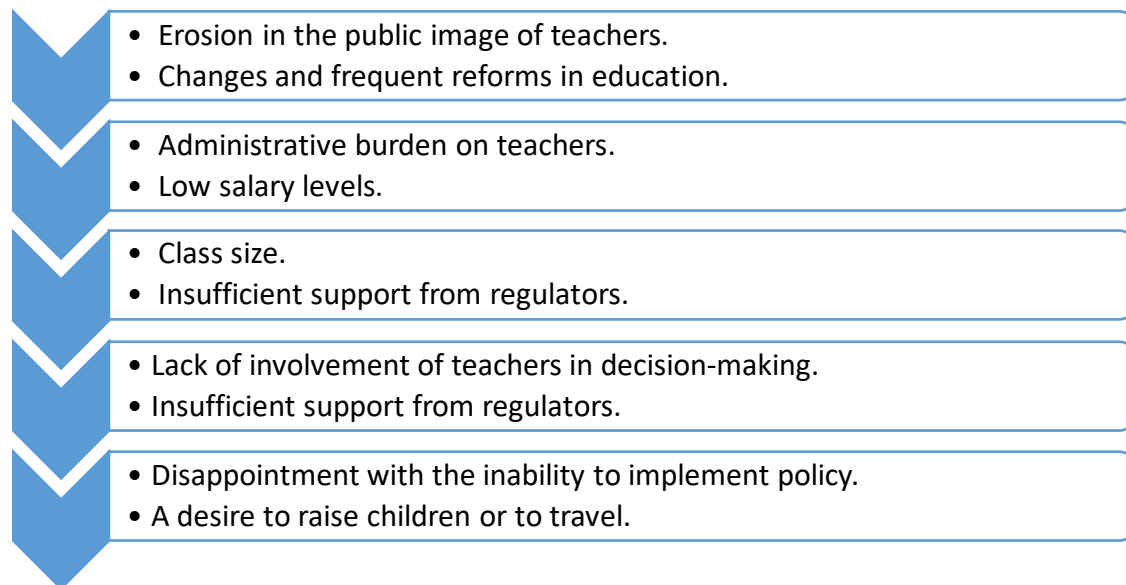


Figure 01. Main reasons for teachers' dropout

Figure No. 1 illustrates that the reasons for teachers' dropout are mainly linked to the working conditions at school, ambiguous state policy regarding teachers' support in their work and the wish to invest in one's family. The rate of teachers' dropout from the teaching profession in education systems around the world is high, particularly at the first stages of their professional career. Many studies have explored the frequency of dropout, its implications for the education system and the reasons for dropout. Most of the studies (Ingersoll, 2001; Shperling, 2015) focused on teachers who dropped out from schools but have not engaged in schools for at-risk youths. The basic assumption was that there was a significant relation between the school climate and teachers' dropout.

Due to the high rate of teachers' dropout from school, great importance is attributed to the present study that aims to identify the factors in the school atmosphere that can keep the teachers in schools for at-risk youths and prevent their dropout.

1.1. Educational climate and school climate

Educational climate or school climate is defined as the quality of the internal environment of the organization, experienced by its members. It describes the layout of the internal characteristics at school, including common perception of the organization members, common values, social beliefs and social standards. The school climate mainly relates to the relationships and atmosphere among the organization members when they collaborate in order to achieve a balance between the organizational, personal and systemic aspects of school. The school atmosphere is characterized by caring, respect and consideration among the employees, the principals' support of their teachers, the employees' morale and an emphasis on academic attainments (Bar-Lev, 2007; Friedman, 1993, 1995; Hillel-Lavian, 2007).

One of the theories about school climate presents four "environments", the teachers being at their center:

1. *Social environment* – consists of teachers' feelings regarding the questions: Who should they talk to or consult at school? Do they have good friends at school? Does teaching at school win them "respect?"
2. *Organizational environment* – constitutes for teachers the nature and quality of the relationship with the principal, the managerial constraints in the institution, inter-personal relations with the administration, communication media, inspection and supervision at school.
3. *Physical environment* – includes the physical spaces, cleanliness of the building and the facilities available to teachers.
4. *General feeling* – encompasses the "general atmosphere at school", the way its employees function, competitiveness, mutual help (Friedman, 1989).

The atmosphere in the teachers' lounge is an inseparable part of the school atmosphere. The teachers' lounge is a separate and defined place, in which teachers spend time when they are not teaching. This is the only place at school where teachers can meet each other during the workday. Apparently, the teachers' lounge allows teachers to rest between the lessons. When they are in the teachers' lounge, teachers drink and eat but most of the time is dedicated to one action – verbal interaction with other teachers (Keinan, 1996). Various studies illustrate that teachers are highly sensitive to the atmosphere prevalent in the teachers' lounge and they distinguish between a "good staff" and a "bad staff" according to the relationships established in this room (Hargreaves, 1980, as cited in Keinan, 1996). In the teachers' lounge, informal groups are formed, meet at different times during the workday, leading to complex relationships among the teachers. These groups create an informal communication network among the teachers. This network is also an instrument for teachers' joint reaction to what transpires in the world outside the teachers' lounge and for a better way of coping with this world (Woods, 1979, as cited in Keinan, 1996). Support and encouragement in the teachers' lounge were indicated by numerous studies of school (McLaren, 1986, as cited in Keinan, 1996). Moreover, many teachers argued that the relationships between the teachers in the teachers' lounge, determined their attitude towards the school as a place of work (Hargreaves, 1980, as cited in Keinan, 1996). The demand for a warm and encouraging atmosphere is part of the collaboration, since teachers' feeling at school affects the teaching level in class. This has an effect on the general functioning of the school which, in turn, impacts the teachers' working conditions (Risenborough, 1984, as cited in Keinan, 1996). The division into sub-groups in the general teachers' lounge at school offers the teachers a small reference group, the collaboration between its members creating an atmosphere of warmth and encouragement in it. Hence, great importance is attributed to the study of the relation between the atmosphere in the teachers' lounge and teachers' dropout, particularly when this concerns a school for at-risk youths, that sets special challenges to the teachers of this population.

1.2. At-risk youths

The public committee that examined the situation of at-risk and distressed children and youths determined an acceptable definition of at-risk children and youths

At-risk children and youths are children and youths that live under risky conditions in their family and environment. These conditions undermine their ability to actualize their rights pursuant to the

International Convention on the Rights of the Child in the following areas: physical existence and development, belonging to a family, learning and acquiring skills, welfare and emotional health, social belonging and participation, protection from others and from their own dangerous behaviors that constitute a risk to themselves. (Schmidt, 2006, p. 67)

In Israel, there are several frameworks that absorb pupils who have dropped out from the normative frameworks:

Technological Education Center – designed for pupils who have found it difficult to persevere in their studies, behavior and regular attendance in comprehensive and other schools. These schools combine theoretical and vocational learning. They are unique in their size (150-250 pupils) as well as in the number of learners per class (13-20).

Youth Employment Enterprise – an Israeli educational - therapeutic framework, designed for the rehabilitation of detached youth, operated by the Youth Rehabilitation Service of the Ministry of Welfare through the local authorities and in collaboration with the Ministry of Education.

Boarding schools - some are educational and some are therapeutic, designed for at-risk youths. In these schools, the inmates learn a profession.

Youth Promotion Department - functions as a “safety net”, offered by the Ministry of Education to the local authorities. This department deals with children and youths who have dropped out from formal education frameworks and are in a state of overt dropout (<http://cms.education.gov.il/>).

Ministry of Economy and Industry Vocational Schools – in which youths can get a paid job in their 11th and 12th grades.

1.3. Characteristics of at-risk youths

At-risk youths have many characteristics, some personality-related and others environmental. There are numerous relations between the various factors that affect the states of risk of the youths at school. Some characteristics are common to pupils at risk and exclusion, each affecting the pupils’ ability to cope with challenges of learning and social integration at school. Part of the difficulties are directly related to the pupils’ family background: most of them come from families with many children, the majority of the families suffer from chronic problems, parental dysfunction, delinquency, states of crisis, changes in the family structure, unemployment and economic hardships.

Behavioral and social characteristics of at-risk youths are manifested by the following problems: difficulty to be integrated in normative social frameworks, sense of loneliness, difficulties of self-control and delayed gratifications, behavioral problems, social excommunication and rejection, eating disorders, depression and suicide attempts (Cohen-Navot, Alenbogen-Perkovitch, & Rinfeld, 2001).

Emotional characteristics of at-risk youths include feelings of helplessness, low self-confidence and signs of anti-social behavior. At-risk pupils are characterized by existential anxiety that sometimes renders it difficult for them to get connected to a valuable and deep approach to learning. The difficulty to promote them from a status of at-risk pupils at the margin of society to pupils of normative functioning stems from the very complex conditions of risk and existential anxiety under which they are living. These pupils prefer

engaging in things that distract them from that anxiety, avoiding the risks involved in establishing a contact or making a progress in their studies (Lahav, 2014).

Among the learners in the education system, there are at-risk children and youths who experience distress. They find it difficult to adjust to the demands of the mainstream system, although they have a normal academic potential. These pupils are characterized by low academic attainments and failures, which accompany them throughout their life. In a summarizing report of the Committee for At-Risk and Distressed Children and Youths, Harnoy (2005) defined academic risk situations, manifested by low attainments, lack of basic reading and writing skills, transition between frameworks, discipline and adjustment problems, learning disabilities, lack of interest in the studies and frequent absenteeism up to absolute detachment.

Teachers' dropout from the profession transpires at high rates in many education systems worldwide. Numerous studies explored this phenomenon in schools in general. However, they did not focus on the reasons for teachers' dropout from schools for at-risk youths. The present study aims to examine the relation between school atmosphere and dropout of teachers from schools for at-risk youths.

2. Problem Statement

Dropout from the teaching profession is a social phenomenon that is increasingly growing in various countries of the western world, mainly in the last two decades. This phenomenon has even won the title "The revolving door", since about one third of the teachers, mainly novice teachers, are constantly moving between schools or are in the process of abandoning the profession for reasons other than retirement (Ingersoll, 2001).

3. Research Questions

School atmosphere and the relation to dropout of teachers in schools for at-risk youths.

4. Purpose of the Study

To identify the factors in the school atmosphere that can keep the teachers in schools for at-risk youths and prevent their dropout.

5. Research Methods

This study was conducted according to the qualitative research approach. The research design included 14 semi-structured interviews with principals, persevering teachers in schools for at-risk youths and teachers who have dropped out from these schools.

5.1. Research instrument - Interviews

For the purpose of the present study, interviews were conducted with five Technological Education Center principals; five teachers who have persevered in their work with at-risk youths and have more than a 5-year seniority in teaching; and four teachers who had dropped out from their work in schools for at-risk youths.

The database was built in a “snow ball” format, namely progressing from one interview to the next. The researcher of this study contacted the participating principals, whom she had known from her position as a principal in the past. Through them, she contacted the persevering teachers and dropping out teachers in these schools. All the interviewees agreed to participate in the study and were assured that the researcher would take every measure in order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of their details (using aliases and hiding identifying details). At the beginning of the interview, the researcher explained the objective of the study to the participants. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasted 20-30 minutes and were recorded (after obtaining all the participants’ permission). The interviews related to the reasons for the dropout of teachers working in schools for at-risk youths. The interviewees were asked a general question: “In your opinion, what causes teachers to leave the school and move to another one?” Furthermore, they were asked a focused inquiry question: “In your opinion, to what extent can the atmosphere at school help teachers to persevere in their work?”

For purposes of appropriate disclosure, it is important to indicate that the researcher was herself a teacher and principal of a school for at-risk youths. This fact attests to involvement and ability to thoroughly comprehend the essence of these populations. Patton (as cited in Shkedi, 2003) argues that in order to understand the investigated subject, researchers must be part of it and, yet, remain separated from it. Hence, researchers should be aware of their position. The researcher of the present study has exerted efforts in order to remain faithful to the words of the interviewees. The data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews. In accordance with the research population, every word said in the interview reflected the participants’ opinions, feelings and views. Consequently, the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim (Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2001).

5.2. Data analysis method

After every interview, it was transcribed and analyzed. The data in the present study were analyzed by topics, focusing on the atmosphere at school. This analysis turned the text into a window that facilitated a view of the human experience, displaying the participants’ emotions, thoughts, beliefs and opinions. The data analysis, then, is a process of arranging and building the collected information for the purpose of interpreting it and understanding its meanings (Shkedi, 2003).

The first stage of the analysis illustrated to the researcher the data obtained from the interviews (the open-encoding stage (Strauss & Corbin, as cited in Shkedi, 2003). The second stage served for combining together all the data obtained in the previous stage (axial encoding stage). The third stage (selective encoding stage) aimed to strengthen the internal validity of the findings by aggregating the data according to the category (Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2001). At this stage, the researcher of the present study tried finding points of similarity and difference that might link the various interviews around the investigated subject. Following the selective encoding stage, the features indicated below were chosen:

- Perception of school as “a home”, as “a family”.
- Importance of collaboration between the teaching staff and management.
- Sense of belonging.

6. Findings

The content analysis yielded three themes, presented in Table 1.

Table 01. Categories and examples of evidence

Collaboration			Sense of belonging			Sense of a family		
Persevering teachers	Dropping out teachers	Principals	Persevering teachers	Dropping out teachers	Principals	Persevering teachers	Dropping out teachers	Principals
"All this collaboration, everything is built on collaboration between staff members and once they hear that there are ways and that someone can help them, then they will not want to leave"	"The staff itself, sure, if it does not, you know, hold hands enough and stick to each other, then you are alone. And you feel you have no one to rely upon and you drop out from this place"	"If there will be here a language of openness and of collaboration at school, there is no reason, to very great extent teachers survive. Teacher remain, not as survivors but remains with love"	"The atmosphere at school is really the key word because the pupils also see how the teachers talk with each other, the atmosphere at school and this affects them. As a result the pupils really succeed, due to the atmosphere and the sense of belonging. I think that the sense of belonging is the most important"	"Creating a sense of belonging"	"There must be a wide envelope from a pedagogical and emotional point of view and from the aspect of the atmosphere at school"	"But in other schools... these are bigger and the teachers' lounge is not small and familial as in our school. I think that this is the first factor that makes us anyway cope with this daily practice"	"The atmosphere at school was not simple. Frequently the staff shouted at the pupils. There were incidents of violence between children and groups of children in the school-yard"	"If we have here an atmosphere of a family, of a staff that walks together with you, they always remain since they choose to do it, since it's fun"

The present study explored the relation between the atmosphere in schools for at-risk youths and teachers' dropout. Analysis of the interviews shows that except for one dropout teacher, who found no relation between the school atmosphere and teachers' dropout, all the other interviewees underscored the relation between the school atmosphere and teachers' dropout.

Table No. 1 indicates that analysis of the persevering teachers' interviews attested to their love for the school and the staff working in it. Moreover, the issue of collaboration between staff members was presented as an important factor of teachers' connection to school and their way of coping with the

difficulties they encounter, as well as the sense of belonging in relation to the school atmosphere. The school was defined as “a family” and a direct relation was specified between a positive atmosphere and teachers’ motivation.

Analysis of the interviews of teachers who had dropped out from their work with at-risk youths, illustrated an unpleasant school atmosphere, the relation between the school atmosphere and its impact on the teachers and the pupils as well as the sense of belonging in this context. Furthermore, the interviews showed the relation between the teachers’ level and mutual support and the school atmosphere. One teacher, who dropped out from a school where the atmosphere was good, left the school because she moved to another place of residence.

Analysis of the interviews of principals of schools for at-risk youths illustrates the relation between the school atmosphere and the sense of belonging. School was perceived as “a home” and the staff as “a family”. In addition, the issue of collaboration and relation between a positive atmosphere and teachers’ motivation, was also presented.

6.1. Perception of school as “a home”, as “a family”

6.1.1. Words of the persevering teachers

“Most of teachers who remained in their work, have done it because of the school atmosphere. I think that we are a small staff... sense of a family”.

“However, in other schools, these are big schools and the teachers’ lounge is not small and familial like in our school. I think this is the first reason for persevering with this daily coping”.

“You can see it immediately when you come to school. There is a very personal attitude. Everyone knows everybody. That is, even a teacher who does not teach in class, knows the name of the pupils and greets them in the morning. The attitude is very personal and it enveloped me, this attitude that I have received as a teacher”.

6.1.2. Words of the dropping out teachers

“The atmosphere at school was not simple. There were frequently shouts of the school staff on the pupils. There were incidents of violence between children and groups of children in the schoolyard”.

“When I spent time in the teachers’ lounge, I saw people who were weak from a pedagogical point of view and the school was not conducted with certain anchors, certain frequencies. Everything was managed around some chaos, only to indicate the sign of ✓ all the time”.

6.1.3. Words of the principals

“A staff that has worked together for many years, likes the togetherness of the staff, one with the other”.

“A feeling of consolidation among the staff members and a sense of home and joint experiences”.

“The atmosphere had a very strong effect from this viewpoint of the feeling that we come to a place that is like home, a place that is understanding, containing the teachers and we are like that”.

“If we have here an atmosphere of a family, of a home, of a staff that walks with you always, then they stay because they choose to stay, because it’s fun. You know you have a warm place here and there is

an attentive ear and there is someone who will help you, support you. If today you have a difficult day, then you know that someone will help you, lift you up. I also think that you know they share your destiny, then they are the only ones that can understand you”.

“I believe that a staff that feels at home, that school is like “a second home” for them. They see the teaching staff as partners to their success. Without competition, rivalry among the teams, who is more valuable, or who succeeded more. This is one of the important factors for remaining at school”.

6.2. Importance of collaboration between the teaching staff and the management

6.2.1. Words of the persevering teachers

“If they see that there is a good atmosphere at school, if they see that there is a staff that succeeds with the pupils, they will hear about teachers’ success with the pupils, I am sure that this is what will make them stay”

“Sit in the teachers’ lounge, speak, show interest, tell about yourselves, ask questions”.

“All this collaboration, everything is built on collaboration among the staff. If they hear there are ways and someone can help them, then they will not want to leave the school”.

“This is the beauty of this staff, all for one, the hierarchy is not so prominent”.

“The collaboration, working together”.

“The feeling of mutual help, of being there one for the other”.

6.2.2. Words of the dropping out teachers

“Many times, it’s the teacher community. If it’s not strong enough, if it not sufficiently supportive”.

“The staff itself, sure, if it’s not enough... you know, holding hands and stick to the others, then you are alone and you feel that you can trust no one and then you drop out from this place”.

“Wow that is exactly that, an atmosphere can, as we say, make you be or cease to exist. The right atmosphere, even if it is difficult and I can use myself as an example. I worked in a highly complex school. The atmosphere there was so good and there was a sense of togetherness, of a group, collaboration and mutual responsibility, of a common denominator. Consequently, it was easier to cope with the difficulties. I have worked there for years, and I travelled a far distance because this place was something very special. There was an atmosphere of creating for the teachers and this made people remain at school”.

6.2.3. Words of the principals

“The atmosphere of acceptance and support has a very strong impact”.

“The staff is very consolidated”.

“If we have here a language of openness and collaboration, then there is no reason... Teachers survive to a very great extent, they remain but not as survivors, they stay out of love”.

6.3. Sense of belonging

6.3.1. Words of the persevering teachers

“I fell in love with this school, with this staff”.

“I love my place of work. I have been really blessed. I like it very much”.

“Teachers should feel they belong”.

“The atmosphere at school is really the key word because the pupils see how the teachers talk to each other; they see the atmosphere at school. Moreover, it affects the pupils and this is why they actually succeed, due to the atmosphere and sense of belonging. I think that the sense of belonging is the most important”.

“I think that the more teachers feel they are visible, are seen, appreciated, supported, loved, the more they feel people understand their difficulties, that they are not alone. This is not personal. All teachers encounter difficulties. They feel consolation, feel that they are on the right track, someone sees them, hears them”.

6.3.2. Words of the dropping out teachers

“Create a sense of belonging”.

“I had very serious problems with the staff that was very weak from a cognitive point of view. Around me were weak people. You conduct a pedagogical meeting and you see what comes up there, you see the human material. It was difficult for me and they had difficulties with me because, you know, I probably sounded condescending or vain or someone who understands better”.

“Things did not work; there was nothing between me and the staff”.

6.3.3. Words of the principals

“There must be a wider envelop from a pedagogical and emotional point of view and from the viewpoint of the atmosphere at school”.

7. Conclusion

Teachers' dropout is a complex phenomenon, caused by a combination of several factors that are associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment and tendency or wish to leave one's workplace (Finster, 2013), in addition to the special organizational culture of school, the teaching experience and the teachers' systems of values and beliefs (Torres, 2012).

The findings obtained from the interviews are in line with the empirical literature dealing with this topic (Keinan, 1996). They indicate that the school atmosphere has a considerable weight in the context of teachers' dropout. Teachers in schools for at-risk youths, cope with many difficulties in their work with these adolescents (Cohen-Navot et al., 2001; Harnoy, 2005; Lahav, 2014). This is manifested by numerous features, such as a great number of disciplinary problems and refusal to acknowledge teachers' authority, no wish to learn, non-cooperation with the pupils' family, failure to attend school regularly, difficulties of socio-emotional behavior and violent behavior (Cohen-Navot et al., 2001).

To sum up, the school atmosphere is related to the way teachers feel at school, which is connected to the success of the school and of the pupils. Figure No. 2 describes the relation between teachers' feeling and the success of the school and the pupils.

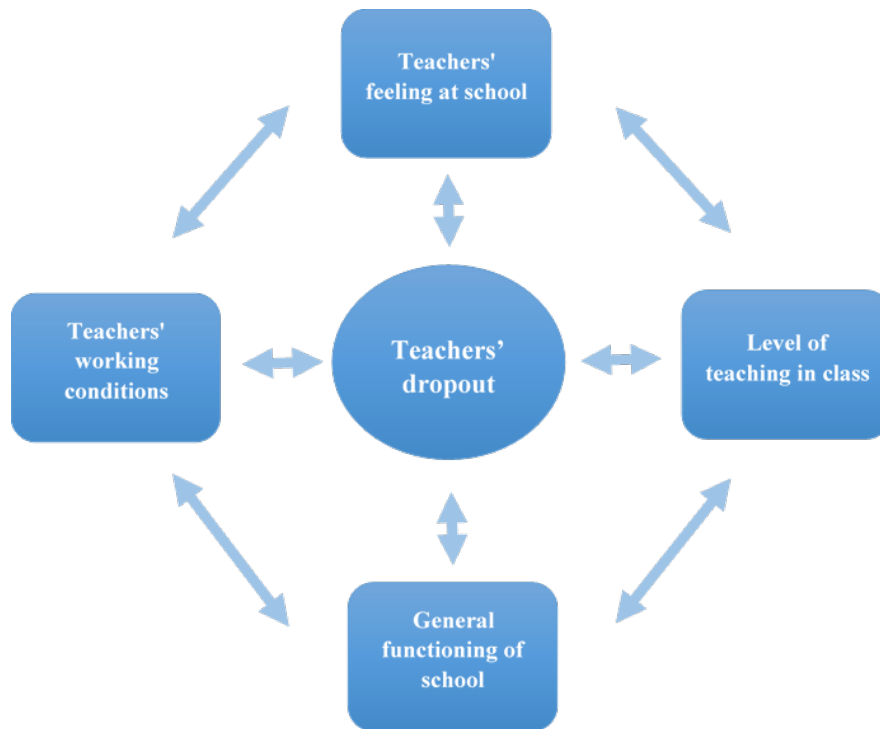


Figure 02. The relation between teachers' feeling and the success of the school and the pupils

Figure 2 illustrates that teachers' feeling at school affects the level of teaching in class. This affects the general functioning of the school which, in turn affects the teachers' working conditions. That is, the higher the teachers' sense of belonging, the deeper the sense of collaboration and the stronger the perception of school as home, the greater teachers' tendency to continue and persevere at school.

To sum up, the school atmosphere has great importance in preventing the dropout of teachers working in schools for at-risk youths.

Research limitations

It is noteworthy that the data are based on a representative sample of five persevering teachers, four dropping out teachers and five Technological Education Center principals. They do not necessarily reflect the positions of all the teachers and principals who work with at-risk youths. Moreover, the principals and teachers who responded to the research questionnaire might be a selective group with a specific and critical opinion about dropout from teaching and might have intensively coped with this phenomenon. Hence, the present study aims to draw attention to this issue.

In spite of these limitations, this unassuming study can transmit an important message to teachers and principals in schools for at-risk youths regarding the crucial need for nurturing a school atmosphere that is supportive, collaborative and encouraging. This would prevent teachers' dropout, as well as loss of this important human and social capital.

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