

# Director's Leadership and Burnout among Residential Child Care Workers: Possible Implications for Practice

**Shulamit Pinchover, Shalhevet Attar-Schwartz and Hila Matattov-Sekeles**

## **Abstract**

This commentary essay discusses the findings of a study involving direct care workers of children in residential care and their perspectives regarding aspects of leadership in their institutions, in order to identify key implications for practice. The article is based on a large study conducted in Israel that examined perspectives from children, residential care workers and directors on various aspects of the social climate of their institution. In this piece we focus on the reports of 201 direct care workers in 24 Jewish residential care settings for at-risk children on levels of burnout, including emotional exhaustion and low sense of personal accomplishment with their work. We examine correlates of this phenomenon, including, among other aspects, their perception of the leadership of their institution's director. The study uses the conceptual framework suggested by Hoy, Smith & Sweetland (2002) originally used to examine the leadership of school principals. We adapted it to the residential child care context, to examine collegial leadership and trust in the director. Collegial leadership refers to workers' perceptions of the director's commitment to them and of the openness and supportiveness expressed in the leadership behaviour of the director towards his or her workers. Trust includes workers' confidence in the reliability, intentions, competence and honesty of their director. The study found that higher levels of perceived collegial leadership and higher levels of trust in the director were linked with lower levels of workers' burnout. These findings emphasize the importance of a positive working atmosphere and trusting relationships between workers and directors. The findings also highlight the benefits of a director sharing his or her knowledge with staff and his or her openness to the staff's views. Some possible key implications of these findings, which are further discussed in this article, include recommendations for directors' training and supervision, routine monitoring of the social climate in children's residential care settings, and the development of leadership models in those settings.

## **Keywords**

Children's homes, external management, staff support, leadership

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## Introduction

The direct care staff in residential care settings (RCSs) are significant figures in the lives of children in these institutions. They accompany the children around the clock and have direct responsibility for the children's upbringing (Seti, 2008; Whittaker & Maluccio, 2002). Their constant, diverse work with children at risk is demanding and complex (Hicks, Archer & Whitaker, 1998). Despite the intense workload and the complex and stressful nature of the work, there is evidence that in many settings, these workers often lack adequate training and receive insufficient guidance and supervision (Heron & Chakrabarti, 2002). These factors may negatively impact on workers' wellbeing and their ability to care for the children. This may also account for the high turnover rate among residential care workers.

According to Maslach and Jackson (1981), burnout is a syndrome resulting from the emotional pressures of work, and includes, among other things, emotional exhaustion and a decrease in the sense of self-worth and satisfaction from work (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). There is a consensus that, because of the emotional demands arising from working with people in distress, burnout is especially common among human services workers (Seti, 2008). While there is a well-developed literature on burnout among professionals in health and social professions (Kim & Stoner, 2008; Lloyd, King & Chenoweth, 2002), surprisingly few studies have been carried out among residential care workers. The existing studies mostly address the therapeutic staff (such as social workers) of RCSs rather than the direct care workers (Seti, 2008). These studies also tend often to focus on the workers' personal characteristics as correlates of worker burnout (e.g., del Valle, López & Bravo, 2007). Other possible contextual factors, such as those related to the social climate of the institution, have not received sufficient attention.

The aim of this paper is to identify key implications for practice in residential child care, based on the findings of a study of direct caregivers' perspectives on the quality of leadership in their institutions and its association with levels of burnout. Because direct caregivers serve as role models and are major contributors to the rehabilitation, treatment, and care of children in RCSs (see, for example, Attar-Schwartz, 2011) burnout among these workers may severely affect not only the workers themselves, but the children at-risk as well. The paper addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining worker burnout in RCSs and its implications for staff and residents, and identifying strategies for decreasing levels of burnout, with an emphasis on improving the leadership of directors.

## Leadership and Burnout

Existing studies, as mentioned above, have mainly focussed on the relationship between burnout and personal characteristics of the RCS staff (Decker, Bailey & Westergaard, 2000), which means that contextual factors, such as the organisational and social climate, have received less attention. However, social climate characteristics of RCSs have been found to be associated with levels of success of the institution and with better outcomes

among the children residing in those institutions (Jordan et al., 2009; Pinchover & Attar-Schwartz, 2012).

One aspect of the RCS climate that has received only limited attention is leadership and management style (for an exception, see: Hicks, Gibbs, Weatherly & Byford, 2009; Lawler & Harlow, 2005). The few existing studies mainly approach leadership style at the theoretical level, describing various models of leadership (Sinclair & Gibbs, 1998). Some studies have linked management style with children's outcomes (Berridge & Brodie, 1998; Hicks, Gibbs, Byford & Weatherly, 2007; Hicks, Gibbs, Weatherly & Byford, 2009). For example, in a large study of UK residential care settings, Hicks and colleagues found a positive association between directors' strategies and children's well-being. In particular, the more the director had clear and well worked-out strategies regarding education and behavioural issues in the RCS, the better the children's educational functioning, behavioural outcomes, and well-being. Although that study focussed on children's outcomes, it also revealed that a better leadership strategy is related to residential care staff feeling they receive clearer and better guidance, which leads to higher staff morale and a better general social climate in the RCS.

Some studies have examined the relationship between staff burnout and contextual factors such as social and organisational climate in other contexts. For example, studies of schools have shown that a more positive climate is associated with lower levels of burnout (e.g. Green, Albanese, Shapiro & Aarons, 2014). A few studies showed that the better the employees' perceptions of their director's leadership style, the lower their levels of burnout (e.g. Angermeier, Dunford, Boss & Boss, 2009; Gill, Flaschner & Shachar, 2006; Hammons, 2013). Similarly, one of the few studies examining burnout among residential care workers showed that greater support from the director is associated with lower levels of worker burnout (Lakin, Leon, & Miller, 2008). In the light of these findings, it is important to recognise and understand the relationship between burnout of care workers in RCSs and workers' perception of the director's management and leadership.

In order to examine the workers' perceptions of the leadership of the director, the Israeli Social Climate in Residential Care Study, on which this article is based (for more details see Attar-Schwartz, 2010, 2011; Pinchover & Attar-Schwartz, 2012), used Hoy's conceptual framework noted earlier. We focussed on two aspects of leadership: collegial leadership; and trust in the director. Collegial leadership includes workers' perceptions of directors' openness and supportiveness of the social needs of their workers, and their commitment to the workers and the goals of the institution. Thus, the collegial director treats the workers in an open and friendly way, like colleagues, but simultaneously requires certain standards of behaviour. Trust, according to the framework suggested by Hoy and others, is defined as the will of an individual or a group to be exposed to others, out of the belief that the other is honest, generous, and reliable (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Studies of school environments based on this framework showed that collegial leadership and trust in the director are related to various child and teacher outcomes, such as higher student achievement, greater teacher efficacy, and a more effective work environment (Dean, 2011; Hoy & Miskel, 2005). The current article expands on this knowledge by including the relation of leadership factors to levels of burnout, as well as by applying it to the residential care context. We provide a brief description of the Israeli out-of-home

placement system and the findings of the Israeli Social Climate Study, before turning to considering what the findings imply for practice.

### **The Israeli Residential Child care Context**

In Israel, between approximately 7,000 and 8,000 children and youth live every year in out of home care. Approximately 80% are placed in RCSs, and the rest reside in foster care (National Council for the Child, 2010). This is in contrast to most Western countries in which children are usually placed in foster families and only minorities of children are placed in residential care as a last resort (Attar, 2006). This difference has roots in historical circumstances. In Israel, RCSs were developed to absorb the large-scale immigration of orphaned Jewish children from Europe after World War II. Over the years, and as a result of social changes in Israel, the composition of children in the residential care system has changed. Currently they serve mostly children at risk (Jaffe, 1982).

### **The Israeli Social Climate in RCS Study**

The Social Climate Study in RCS in Israel (Attar-Schwartz, 2011) was a large-scale study examining the perspectives of children, residential care workers, and directors on various aspects of the social climate in RCSs. In this article, we focus on findings based on reports of 201 Jewish direct care workers in 24 residential care settings in Israel (see Matattov-Sekeles, 2014). Information was collected from the direct care workers through anonymous, structured, self-report questionnaires. The association between workers' perception of RCS director leadership and workers' burnout was examined using the following measures.

#### ***Workers' burnout***

Levels of burnout among workers was based on items from two existing measures: the Pressure Management Indicator (PMI) (Williams & Cooper, 1998), which measures the pressure of workers in organisations, and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), which measures burnout among health and social welfare professionals. The measure included 10 items and addressed two dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion (feeling empty and emotionally drained by work) consisted of four items, such as, 'After a day of work, I feel nervous and exhausted' ( $\alpha = 0.63$ ), and personal accomplishment (a sense of satisfaction and meaning at work) consisted of six items, such as, 'I feel that my work fills me with new energies' ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ).

#### ***RCS director's leadership***

Workers' perceptions of the director's leadership were addressed through two variables, collegial leadership and trust in the director. These variables were examined by two subscales suggested by Hoy, Smith and Sweetland (2002) and Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2003), with slight adjustments to the Israeli RCSs context. The collegial leadership subscale included 10 items, referring to workers' perceptions of the RCS director's willingness to support the needs of the staff and achieve the goals of the institution, such as "Management does not want to try new ideas" ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ) (Hoy, Smith & Sweetland, 2002). The trust in the director subscale, derived from the Omnibus T-Scale developed by

Hoy and colleagues included 10 items referring to the staff's trust in the director and in his or her administrative decisions, such as, 'Staff in this institution can rely on the director' ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ) (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003).

### **Findings**

The study's findings showed a positive association between staff levels of trust towards the director and levels of perceived collegial leadership. We found that higher levels of perceived collegial leadership and higher levels of trust in the director were linked with higher levels of personal accomplishment and lower levels of exhaustion (for a full report of the findings see Matattov-Sekeles, 2014). In other words, in institutions where the director was perceived as committed to the social needs of the workers as well as to the goals of the institution and the staff were able to show high levels of trust in the director and in his/her administrative and professional decisions, the staff showed lower levels of emotional exhaustion and perceived their work as more satisfying and meaningful for them.

### **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

As noted, burnout among workers in residential child care damages the quality of life of the caregivers but, most importantly, also that of the children in their care. In extreme cases, it can even lead to maltreatment (Seti, 2008). The findings described in this article clearly show that the management style of the RCS director is an important factor in explaining variance among residential care workers in their reported levels of burnout. An attentive director who recognises workers' efforts and supports their progress is likely to contribute to creating a positive climate (Milligan, Kendrick & Avan, 2004). The key implication of these findings for practice in RCSs is that fostering a positive working environment through enhanced leadership may serve as a protective factor against burnout among child care workers.

The director has a key role in guiding and supporting staff, clarifying the goals of the organisation, and creating a positive social climate (Zur, 2014). In order to succeed in these multiple tasks, directors must have skills in management and human resources, and must be capable of genuinely understanding their staff as well as acting as a role model for them. The director should also have skills in individual and group work (Hicks, Gibbs, Weatherly & Byford, 2009). Previous research in residential child care has focussed on insufficient training and supervision of residential child workers (see for example Decker Bailey and Westergaard, 2002). However, little research has focussed on the training and supervision of RCS directors (Hicks, Gibbs, Weatherly & Byford, 2009). In order to create the optimal atmosphere of trust and satisfaction among workers, it will be critical to provide adequate training and supervision for managers, especially regarding the practical aspects of creating positive relations with their employees.

There are several models for working with managers to create a better working environment. One example is the model provided by Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, which directly addresses the relation between leadership and worker burnout (Burke, 1985). The model highlights three leadership strategies: first, creating an institutional vision that includes workers as a major factor for success; second, improving communication between

workers and management; and third, creating an atmosphere of trust by providing a sense of worth and appreciation of workers. It is important that such models will apply not only to for-profit organisations but also to such institutions as residential child care settings. As Hicks, Gibbs, Weatherly and Byford (2009) suggest, developing such models for child care institutions should take into consideration the special relationship-targeted, rather than product-targeted, nature of these settings.

Because the literature on organisational climate in schools is relatively well developed, strategies to improve management styles can be imported, with proper adjustment obviously, to the residential care context. For example, the model developed by Hoy, W. K., Smith, P. A. and Sweetland (2002), originally designed to improve school climate, can be adapted to address the RCS climate. The authors suggest using organisational development to improve organisational climate, for example, by measuring the organisational climate of the institution on a regular basis. For example, asking the staff to complete a climate questionnaire such as the Organizational Climate Index (Hoy, W. K., Smith, P. A. & Sweetland, 2002) on a monthly basis, can be a helpful tool in identifying symptoms of social climate problems. Applying this type of routine evaluation to RCSs would allow the RCS director to learn about the workers' feelings and perceptions of his or her leadership. This process could provide an important opportunity for the director to acquire an accurate picture of the atmosphere in the workplace and to identify weak and strong areas. The director and staff could then discuss issues raised by the monitoring process, including problem areas and suggestions for improvement. Armed with a more precise knowledge about the challenges and difficulties in the working environment, both director and workers would be better placed to engage in a positive strategy of change (Hoy, W. K., Smith, P. A. & Sweetland, 2002). For example, the U.S. Department of Education uses and encourages schools to use a teachers' school climate survey, in order to monitor and improve school climate (see Liu, Ding, Berkowitz & Bier, 2014). Using a similar tool adjusted to RCSs, such as the one that was used in this study, on a regular basis, can benefit managers in assessing social RCS climate. It might also be valuable to provide supervision to the director on the issues raised in the monitoring process, helping the director and his or her team to work towards creating an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual trust (Hanson & Lubin, 1995; Hoy & Tarter, 1997). The value of this kind of action is supported by leadership research showing that workers who are involved in decision-making tend to feel more satisfied with their managers (Griffith, 2004).

The positive link we found between collegial leadership and a trusting relationship between workers and administration can aid in finding ways to improve the social climate in RCSs in order to reduce burnout levels among workers. For example, a collegial director - that is, a director who is open with workers, treats them as colleagues, and works to meet their professional and social needs and to set reasonable work standards - has a greater chance of engendering trust and workplace satisfaction among workers (Hoy, W. K., Smith, P. A. & Sweetland, 2002). Establishing trust allows staff to share their views with the director about his or her management style, which, in turn, provides the director with the opportunity to develop. The relationship between collegial leadership and trust is circular: strengthening one can benefit both.

There is a great need for further research on the context of the institutions in which certain leadership styles are being used, as well as the cultural context in which they occur. Studies in other fields, particularly in the health professions, have shown that the relationship between leadership and burnout can be complex, and is affected by both the characteristics of the settings as well as those of the individual workers. Therefore, discussing the improvement of leadership in order to reduce worker burnout must be tailored to different types of employees and different types of settings (Kanste, Kyngäs & Nikkilä, 2007). In addition, leadership and trust are only part of the social climate in RCS. An integrative practice and research model would take into account the complexity of the relationships involved in contributing to the social climate of residential care settings, such as the relationships among staff, the relationships between staff and children, and the staff's relationship with the director (see Attar-Schwartz, 2011; Hair, 2005).

In conclusion, burnout among direct care workers in RCSs is an important issue, given the variation in training and guidance workers tend to have and the challenging behaviours the workers often deal with. RCSs directors' management and leadership style has been found to be an important factor in explaining the variance in burnout levels among workers. It is therefore important to emphasise leadership style, through ongoing monitoring and staff feedback, in programs aimed at improving the social climate in residential settings, in order to reduce worker burnout.

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