

## **Storied emotional distances in the relationships between beginning teachers and school principals**

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# STORIED DISTANCES IN THE EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

## **Abstract**

Recent research has acknowledged the importance of the relationships of school principals with beginning teachers. However, little is known about how emotions inform these relationships from the beginning teacher's side. Applying the concept of emotional geographies (Hargreaves, 2001a), this article explores the kinds of storied emotional distances that appear in the relationships between beginning teachers and their principals. Based on interviews with beginning Japanese teachers, the results indicate that such relationships may be 1) very direct and personal; 2) acted out indirectly by the principal as personal facilitator 'behind the scenes' or as public gatekeeper; or 3) mediated by the teacher community. The analysis reveals beginning teachers' personal experiences of these relationships, as well as how such relationships are influenced by organisational and cultural context. Although principals are described as distant figures within the school organization, they are seen to play an important role in facilitating beginning teachers' work by connecting with them at a personal level and providing good working conditions by influencing the emotional atmosphere of the teacher community or by sheltering them from parental pressure.

**Keywords:** beginning teachers, educational relationships, emotional geographies, school principals

## **1. Introduction**

In understanding how teachers cope in their early career, it is important to take account of the social dimension of teachers' working environments, and especially their inter-adult relationships (e.g. Devos, Dupriez & Paquay, 2012). Functioning collegial relationships support beginning teachers' professional growth (Barth, 2006; Hargreaves, 2001; Kihara & Kubo, 2012) and their commitment through sharing of positive work-related experiences (Jo,

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2014; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003) and personal affective issues (Struyve et al., 2016). In this regard, there is evidence that principals can contribute to reducing work-related pressure and uncertainty through leadership practices that provide emotional support and meaningful guidance (Kelchtermans, Ballet & Piot, 2009), so increasing teachers' job satisfaction and retention (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). A beginning teacher's relationship with their principal may either support or hinder their personal and professional wellbeing (Peters & Pearce, 2012). The importance of this relationship for the beginning teacher's work has been well documented, and some research has also been done on the emotions of principals (e.g. Beatty, 2000; Crawford, 2004), but less is known about how beginning teachers tell about their emotional experiences of these relationships. The present study addresses that gap and discussed the implications for teacher education and the training of principals.

### **2. Theoretical and methodological framework**

#### ***2.1 Beginning teachers and principals in Japan***

For present purposes, a beginning teacher can be defined as someone who has worked in the field for less than seven years. Research on beginning teachers has increased of late because of the growth internationally in early teacher turnover (Day, Elliot & Kington, 2005; Peters & Pearce, 2012); topics have included the difficulties experienced by beginning teachers and measures to support them (Clandinin et al., 2015; Clark, 2015; Wakimoto & Chôshi, 2015); the crucial role of principals in support for beginning teachers (e.g. Peters & Pearce, 2012; Roberson & Roberson, 2009); and how collegial relationships and teaching culture shape the experiences of the early career stage (e.g. Aspfors & Bondas, 2012; Devos et al. 2012; Lassila & Uitto, 2016).

The beginning teachers in this research worked in elementary and junior high schools. In Japan, teachers are usually transferred to another school after six years and are no

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longer considered beginners (Shimahara, 2002). Most teachers working at these levels have completed a four-year undergraduate programme that includes three weeks of teaching practicum to gain a teaching certificate. Full-time teachers must also pass a highly competitive employment examination (Fujita, 2007). As beginners enter the field with little experience, they are dependent on the support of more experienced teachers around them (Howe, 2005; Shimahara, 2002). In many countries, the principal plays a key role in the induction phase, introducing the new teacher to the school, ensuring the conditions for their professional growth and endorsing and implementing supportive practices (Peters & Pearce, 2012; Roberson & Roberson, 2009). In Japan, however, mentors and close colleagues are expected to take an active role in the induction and socialisation of the beginning teacher (e.g. Howe, 2005; Shimahara, 2002). Although the Japanese principal assumes a more subdued role, their support and feedback can make a great difference when the beginning teacher encounters problems and is wondering whether to remain in the profession (Kubota & Satô, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

In Japan, the roles and responsibilities of the principal and vice principal are usually clearly differentiated in both elementary and junior high schools, although this may differ from school to school. While the principal's role is strongly symbolic, embodying the traditions and character of the school (McGee, 1997; Willis & Bartell, 1990), the vice principal leads the teacher community, and teachers also take part in managing the school through various committees (Shimahara, 2002). The principal, on the other hand, spends a great deal of time dealing with external relations, deciding schedules and managing the school's human resources. This division of responsibility is reflected in the physical setting; while the vice principal occupies a central position in the staff room (*shokuin shitsu*), the principal typically works from a separate office, although for daily morning meetings and similar events, they will sit next to the vice principal.

### ***2.2. Narrativity as a methodological starting point***

The present research is ontologically and epistemologically grounded in narrativity—that is, in the understanding that stories do not just describe or reflect social reality but are constructed by the process of telling (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Stories are useful tools for exploring teachers' personal and professional experiences and sensemaking (Elbaz-Luwisch 2005; Spector-Mersel 2010); through narration, teachers construct their professional selves and their understanding of their relationships in schools. However, beyond the narrator's personal experiences, stories also reflect the social context in which they are produced and evolve (here, the school as organisation) and the broader system of cultural meaning or meta-narratives (in this case, Japanese culture and the teaching profession) (Tuval-Maschiach, 2008).

Telling stories is a dynamic social and interactional process, in which the telling is intertwined with the content. For this reason, the analysis of stories aims to capture verbal expression as well as themes (e.g. Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Hyvärinen, 2008). Additionally, as stories are always told in unique situations, both the relationship between the storyteller (the participating teacher) and the listener (the researcher) and the storyteller's narrative aims inform what is told (Bamberg, 2012; Gubrium & Holstein, 2012; Spector-Mersel, 2010).

### ***2.3 'Emotional geographies of teaching' as an analytical tool***

The relational dimension of teachers' work cannot be meaningfully explored without also taking account of the intertwining emotional and moral dimensions (e.g. Aultman et al., 2009; Cowie, 2011; Jo, 2014). During the past decade, educational research has increasingly acknowledged the importance of emotions in this context (Uitto, Jokikokko & Estola, 2015). Following Hargreaves (1998), Nias (1996), and Zembylas (2003), we understand teachers'

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work to be by its nature a strongly emotional practice, in that the act of teaching influences the actions and feelings of teachers themselves and of those with whom they work and form relationships (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 838). Beyond the personal and psychological experiences of the individual, emotions are deeply social, influenced by the norms of the surrounding culture and by teachers' interactions with their professional environment (Kelchtermans, 2005; Zembylas, 2004). Teachers' emotional practices are also tied to their moral purposes and involve elements of status and power (Lasky, 2000; Zembylas, 2003). In this regard, principals have the power to make decisions that may go against their reasons for teaching, inducing various emotions. Principals can also use power to influence the emotional politics of their schools, so affecting the emotional atmosphere in which teachers work (Hargreaves, 2008).

Here, the conceptual framework of *emotional geographies* is used to examine 'the spatial and experiential patterns of closeness and/or distance in human interactions and relationships, that help create configure and colour the feelings and emotions we experience about ourselves, our world and each other' (Hargreaves, 2001a, p. 1061). According to this definition, emotional geographies relate to emotional understanding, as people seek to understand the viewpoints and emotions of others on the basis of their own similar experiences. Hargreaves divided emotional geographies into six *distances*: 1) sociocultural distance (differences in race, culture, gender etc. that create distance between people); 2) moral distance (common goals, shared purposes and accomplishments or disagreements over goals and purposes); 3) professional distance (definitions and norms of professionalism, setting colleagues apart or creating opportunities for collaboration); 4) physical distance (issues of time and space that promote or hinder cooperation); 5) political distance (differences in power and status); and 6) personal distance (closeness of relationships at a personal level). This framework has not been widely applied since Hargreaves's original study, but as emotions are constructed in forming relationships (Lasky, 2000; Zembylas, 6

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2004), it seems useful to examine how basic emotional bonds and understandings between people are created by reference to these distances (Hargreaves, 2001a; 2008). As an analytic tool, the concept of emotional geographies informs the present study as a means of problematising and comprehending the complexity of the relationship between beginning teacher and principal, addressing the following research question: What kinds of storied emotional distances emerge in the relationships between beginning teachers and their principals?

### **3. Research procedure**

#### ***3.1 Producing the research materials***

In Japan, it is especially important to use culturally appropriate means to produce relevant data, as people may be unwilling to participate in qualitative inquiries without the involvement of a third party to mediate between researcher and participant (see Bestor, Steinhoff & Bestor, 2003). In the present case, participants were recruited through a wide network of contacts, using the so-called ‘snowball method’ to ensure adequate representation of different teachers and working environments. Some of the participating teachers worked in a junior high school (K-school) known to the first author, enabling interaction with teachers outside the interview setting (see Table 1).

The research material is primarily narrative. The first author conducted interviews with 16 beginning Japanese teachers between December 2013 and October 2015. Of these, nine were interviewed twice and the rest only once because of time constraints. All interviews lasted about an hour and were conducted entirely in Japanese and audio-recorded by the first author proficient in the language. The interviews took place either at the school premises or at a place of the teacher’s choosing. Two interviews were conducted via Skype.

Some guiding themes were decided before the interviews, based on the authors’ research interest in beginning teachers’ relationships and emotions, but the teacher’s own

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narration was emphasised and encouraged, in accordance with the principles of the narrative approach. Interviews began with an invitation to talk about the experience of being a beginning teacher. In addition, while teachers were free to choose topics, the first author asked for stories about how they became teachers (the first interview) or about current issues in their work (the second interview). The interviews then progressed in a more spontaneous manner, but stories about relationships and emotions were actively sought where they did not emerge naturally. In contrast to narration of relationships with students and colleagues, teachers' relationships with principals often had to be prompted. In addition, relationships with principals were more often told in a somewhat distanced and generalised manner, contrasting with the thick narration of lived experience that characterised references to other relationships. As they represented teachers' understandings of different aspects of the work, both of the two qualitatively different ways of telling about relationships with principals informed the analysis. The distanced telling of relationships suggests that principal is not just another colleague, which is in itself an interesting finding.

**(Insert Table 1 about here)**

Most of the participating teachers worked in middle-sized schools in one of two major urban centres and had been teaching for four years on average. With the exception of one first-year teacher (Sumikawa-sensei), all had taught in more than one school and had experience of working with several (vice) principals. The sample was evenly balanced between male and female teachers and encompassed most of the subjects taught in the schools. In Japanese elementary schools, 62% of teachers are female, as are 19% of principals; in junior high schools, 42% of teachers and 6% of principals are female (MEXT, 2013).

In narrative research, the researcher must be vigilant about research ethics,



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given the potential for personal closeness to participants. Commitment to the relationship goes beyond protecting anonymity (all names here are pseudonyms) to protection from any kind of harm during and after their involvement (Josselson, 2007). In the fieldwork, the researcher was ethically sensitive and tried not to disrupt the relationships of participating teachers, treating the teachers' stories with great care and respect. The researcher also sent a draft of the article to participants, with a Japanese explanation of their contribution, for comments via email. Only a few replied, saying that they had no problems with our interpretations.

### *3.2 Analysis*

The analysis consisted of three overlapping phases.

*Phase 1.* Based on the discussions around the area of interest and the research question, the first author organised the transcribed interview material involving the principals and immediate colleagues, working as far as possible with the original language and referring back to the Japanese transcripts to make sure nothing was lost in translation.

*Phase 2.* The other authors then joined in the analysis. To facilitate this, the first author translated into English any parts referring to beginning teachers' relationships with their principals and colleagues. In a categorical content analysis as described by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber (1998, pp.112–113), smaller units were extracted from the interview texts to identify thematic similarities and differences between these. Based on the distance of the relationship as told and the role of colleagues, three storied distances were identified in the beginning teacher-principal relationship. This initial reading was theoretically oriented and drew on Hargreaves's emotional geographies (2001) for the concept of distance. The three storied distances in the beginning teacher-principal relationships were characterised as: 1) very direct and personal; 2) acted out indirectly by the principal, as personal facilitator behind the scenes or as public gatekeeper; and 3) mediated

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by the teacher community.

*Phase 3.* The extracts were then read through the emotional geographies lens to identify what kinds of emotions the distances in teachers' told relationships with principals entailed. In many instances, teachers did not name emotions explicitly, requiring close attention to the language and metaphors they used, revealing emotions indirectly through careful reading of the content and close attention to the forms and linguistic markers in the text (Zilber, 1998). For example, Sugawara-sensei's utterance '*I must have caused him a lot of trouble back then*' contained the word *meiwaku*, which translates as *bother, inconvenience* or *trouble* and culturally implies feeling sorry for whoever suffered the inconvenience. Special attention was paid to how some teachers used strongly moral and emotional expressions that were more absolute in their nature: '*When schools have a bad atmosphere, almost always the principals are also bad. With good principals, it's a different story*' (Ariyama-sensei). The next section discusses each of the three categories in turn.

### **4. The direct relationship: 'The principal comes and talks to me'**

#### ***4.1 Like a parent***

Officially, the beginning teacher and the principal inhabit the roles of teacher and administrator. However, at an experiential level, the connection between the two individuals can be closer and more profound, sometimes to the extent that the line between the professional and the personal can almost disappear (Nias et al., 1989). In the present study, rather than talking about formal encounters, the beginning teachers often referred to the more personal side of the relationship. In this storied distance, we placed those extracts in which the principal comes emotionally close to the beginning teachers in terms of both physical and personal geographies (see Hargreaves, 2001), as in the following extract.

*'When I was having problems, the principal listened to my problems. It had more to do with*

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*him being about the same age as my father and listening in a father-like manner than because he was the principal. I still think of it with gratitude'. (Haru-sensei)*

Haru-sensei was a second-year science teacher in a junior high school with no other young teachers. He described his relationship with the principal using the metaphor of the father and so telling the relationship as emotionally close. Van Manen (1991) used the term *in loco parentis* (in place of the parent) to describe the parent-like role adopted by some teachers in the pedagogical relationship with students. In the above description of the principal-beginning teacher relationship, 'parenting' is told as being attentive when the beginning teachers wanted to share their problems. As another teacher explained, some principals also play a more active role.

*'Apart from always asking me if I was having problems with my classroom and coming to see how I was doing, they [the principals] talked about non-work-related things and sometimes told dad jokes'. (Yasuhiko-sensei, first interview)*

Discussing non-teaching-related things and laughing together can signify social acceptance and affiliation, which may be emotionally important for teachers (see Hargreaves, 2001b). It can also be a good way of building emotional understanding and closeness between individuals within groups. In sharing laughter, both personal and moral distances narrow, as people tend only to laugh with people with whom they share emotional understanding (see Francis, 1994; Hargreaves 2001b.)

The comparison of the principal to a father in the above extract is a gendered framing of the relationship that was also a feature of Sekiguchi-sensei's interview.

*'Until last year, I had only had male principals, but in my new school, there is a female*

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*principal. I thought: 'As we are the same gender, it is easier to say things more strictly'; unsurprisingly, female teachers are unique in that way (laughs). Of course, she acknowledged me but always said things like: "Wouldn't it be better to do things like this" in a prickly way (laughs). Her way of talking to male teachers of the same age was different than how she talked to me. I think this is pretty common, and it is said that female teachers and female administrators do not get along well, regardless of their ages'. (Sekiguchi-sensei, first interview)*

In the above excerpt, the principal was told as distant on grounds of gender. The principal acknowledged her at a professional level, but there was a distance at the personal level, as evidenced by the use of the word *prickly* to describe how the principal talked to her. This speaks of a personal distance, as the principal deals with teachers of different genders in ways that are quite obviously independent of her professional role. Based on Sekiguchi-sensei's account, that distance probably reflects socio-cultural aspects of hierarchical relationships between females in Japan.

### ***4.2 'He came and started talking to me'***

The importance of physical presence and closeness was also illustrated in the extracts:

*'Here, the distance between the principal and the teachers is really short. In my previous school, the principal's office was far from the staff room, and there were few chances to meet him/her. (S)he was also difficult as a character. Here, the principal's office is close by, and he is often in the staff room. He is an open and active person who talks about non-school related things'. (Ami-sensei, first interview)*

Here, the narration of physical distance is echoed in the emotional distance and the evaluation

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of the principal's character, as if they were connected. The cultural ideal in Japanese education is to nurture close emotional bonds with students and colleagues (Shimahara, 2002), and principals were often said to be doing that. Closeness and warmth became apparent when teachers talked about their encounters with principals outside working hours; one teacher had invited her principal and vice principal to her wedding, and another was invited to a party at their principal's home. Encounters at informal events tell us about acknowledging the principal at a more personal level. In Japanese organisations, formal roles loosen during frequent social gatherings, where teachers can nurture emotional understanding through personal closeness with colleagues, including principals, in a culturally and socially acceptable manner. The researcher witnessed such encounters at first hand during research in the K-school.

Camaraderie and non-teaching-related talk with the principal was considered important (especially for male teachers), helping to create personal closeness, as the following extract reveals.

*'They [principals of the current school] really aren't distant at all—usually, how should I put it, I think it is not difficult to talk to them about everyday things, sports you like and so on. The principals in my previous schools were the same'. (Tanizaki-sensei)*

Talking about everyday things with principals was referred to in several extracts, as here, and only a few mentioned being explicitly guided by the principal. Non-work-related talk and closeness with the principal seem to go hand in hand. However, while the principal becomes close emotionally in terms of personal geographies, and political and professional distance are in effect ignored during more relaxed encounters, sociocultural distance persists, as illustrated in the two following extracts.

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*‘When the principal started talking to me casually about non-teaching-related things, I thought: “Oh, I guess it’s ok for me to tell them all kinds of things as well”’. (Satô-sensei, first interview)*

*‘The principal is also a very easy person to talk to, and he talks to me, which makes it easier for me to start talking to him’. (Sumikawa-sensei)*

Clearly, the principal had to make the first contact by initiating conversation, at which point the relationship often became more relaxed and emotionally closer. Waiting for the principal to initiate discussion on non-work-related matters is natural, as it is culturally the responsibility of the senior party in a relationship to decide when to relax the formalities (see Willis & Horvath, 1988). This relates to the higher status of seniors in political and sociocultural geographies (senior-junior relationship), which is why the principal determines how close the relationship becomes in terms of personal and physical distance.

### **5. The facilitating relationship: Working ‘behind the scenes’ or as a ‘gatekeeper’**

In the second storied distance, the beginning teacher-principal relationship becomes more distanced and indirect but retains a strongly personal element. This category includes beginning teachers telling about their principal working to support them, or failing to do so.

#### **5.1 ‘Working behind the scenes’**

*‘The vice principal greeted me warmly every morning as I managed to drag myself to school and always seemed a bit worried for me. Then, when he became principal and I was having difficulties with my classroom management, he protected me from parental criticism by listening to their worries and persuading them to turn a blind eye to some of my mistakes. I must have caused him a lot of trouble back then’. (Sugawara-sensei, first interview)*

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In the above extract, Sugawara-sensei tells us how the principal pulled a lot of strings and dealt with parental pressure when she was having a difficult time with her class, taking her side in a situation where he might equally have chosen to agree with the parents. She was grateful for what was done for her, noting that *'I must have caused a great deal of trouble'* She tells us that she feels sorry for her principal, reminding us that the emotions involved in relationships are rarely simple or one-dimensional. This extract illustrates how the principal can support the beginning teacher and facilitate their work by acting behind the scenes and solving problems in a discreet style that McGee (1997) has called *'working under water'*, which we refer to here as *'working behind the scenes'*.

There were occasions where the beginning teacher did not appreciate the good intentions of their principal's actions *'behind the scenes'*, and there were some emotional misunderstandings. Kumamoto-sensei, an elementary school teacher who had been away from teaching for a couple years, told how her principal had granted her wish to teach a class of older students, even though she lacked experience, and supported her at the start of the year. However, things subsequently became very difficult, and the principal began to say that if things did not improve, he would not allow her to teach the same class the following year and would move her to a new school.

*'It came as a shock to me, but later I understood that the principal was trying to protect both me and himself by suggesting I should change schools as the pressure from displeased parents grew'*. (Kumamoto-sensei, first interview)

Here, the emotional reaction to the principal's actions was one of shock. Kumamoto-sensei's account of the relationship suggests that they did not share an emotional understanding at the time, and that she was saddened by his actions. The principal, whom she thought of as her ally because he had allowed her to teach a challenging class, was seen as breaching her trust

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by siding with the parents. Her difficulties resulted in a nervous breakdown, and she left teaching. This illustrates that a principal's professional and personal support are important components of resilience (see Day & Gu, 2013), but these were clearly insufficient in the case of Kumamoto-sensei. Ultimately, she came to understand that the principal had also been in a tough spot and had done his best in a situation where, as a 'gatekeeper', he had to manage relationships both inside and outside the school (see Kelchtermans, Piot & Ballet, 2011).

### *5.2 The reliable public 'gatekeeper'*

From the emotional geographies perspective, teachers want a principal who is morally close to them, sharing the same values and goals (Hargreaves, 2001), and the interviewed teachers identified bad leadership and principals in terms of a lack of these qualities. This is illustrated by Ariyama-sensei as she reflects on her experiences of working with several different principals.

*'Bad principals don't think about our feelings or how decisions affect our work; they just give orders directly as they occur to them. Good principals consider the situation and the feelings of teachers and may refuse requests from outside [board of education etc.], telling them that our teachers are too busy to be disturbed'.* (Ariyama-sensei, second interview)

This extract reveals how the beginning teacher hopes for emotional understanding and thoughtfulness from their principal. From her own experience, Ariyama-sensei is aware that it is within the power of the principal to refuse requests from outside to some extent. Knowing this, disappointment when the principal fails to deliver is understandable. This extract reminds us how principals are expected to act as 'gatekeepers' between the school community and the outside world, responding to different interests and agendas from both



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sides while not completely belonging to either (Kelchtermans et al., 2011). Teachers naturally expect the principal to side with them during conflicts, ensuring that the school can function well as an organisation and that teachers can work in an appropriate pedagogical environment (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Kelchtermans et al., 2011). Japanese principals typically frame their role in this way (see Sato & McLaughlin, 1992), and any threat to those ideal working conditions elicits strong emotional reactions from teachers (e.g. Blackmore, 2004; Hargreaves, 2004). This is apparent in Kumamoto-sensei's extract, where the interests of parents outweighed those of the teacher.

A principal's actions can also prompt a strong moral reaction. One beginning teacher used a striking metaphor to describe an unpopular principal:

*'In my first school, all the teachers hated the principal, who was like a tanuki [lit. Japanese raccoon; used to describe someone who is arrogant, flees from difficulties, is weak in dealing with superiors and strict towards underlings]. I think this was because he did not take responsibility as leader of the school, did not defend the teachers during problematic times, did not give advice or consult through meetings'.* (Yasuhiko-sensei, first interview)

Here, Yasuhiko-sensei, who had also worked under many well-liked principals, illustrates how a principal is negatively perceived when using their position of power to advance their own interests while failing to meet their responsibilities towards teachers. Principals who do not support (beginning) teachers, or who implement initiatives and orders that do not accord with teachers' views, create a moral distance between them. When this happens, the relationship with the principal is experienced negatively as described above by Ariyama and Yasuhiko-sensei (see also Hargreaves, 2008).

The principal must also carefully manage their position of power inside the school. Power for the management of the school is distributed across several levels and

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people, but teachers nevertheless expect the principal to be a strong leader when needed. This point was addressed by Yasuhiko-sensei.

*'I have not met a single principal who enjoyed the trust of all teachers, even though many of them are 'good guys'. They always either made decisions by themselves, without sharing any responsibility, or they left too much for teachers to decide'.* (Yasuhiko-sensei, first interview)

The principal has to strike a balance in sharing power and responsibilities with teachers, ensure their voices are heard and respected in decision making without leaving teachers to carry the burden of running the school by themselves. This balance determines perceptions of the principal's leadership; if the principal fails to maintain the trust of staff by assisting them in adapting to change or protecting them from external demands, the effective leadership ideals of 'power through' and 'power with' cannot be fully exercised (Smeed, Kimber & Millwater, 2009).

In this storied distance, the principal acts as a gatekeeper. The key emotional geography is the moral dimension, as evidenced by teachers complaining for example how *'principals don't think about our feelings, or about how the decisions affect our work'* (Ariyama-sensei, second interview). There are several possible explanations for insufficient emotional understanding. From an organisational standpoint, Japanese principals are at some political distance from beginning teachers (see Hargreaves, 2001), as they are administrators with no teaching duties, and many of the problems that teachers face are handled by the vice principal or by other teachers. If a principal is insufficiently aware of the everyday issues faced by beginning teachers, they can become emotionally distanced, as illustrated by the words of the next teacher, who had worked in several different schools.

*[Laughing] 'In general, the administrators of the school think about teachers' issues and*

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*help out, but in my experience, about every fifth time, they do not really understand the nature of the problem the teacher is having*'. (Katase-sensei, first interview)

The laughter may suggest that principals live to some extent in their own separate world, which sometimes makes teachers' work more difficult but is something they learn to live with. By the same token, busy beginners do not always know what principals are doing.

*'Apart from producing documents, dealing with the PTA and always looking busy, I don't really know what he did. His actions remain a mystery to me*'. (Yasuhiko-sensei, first interview)

The above extract suggests that beginners are aware only of the visible aspects of the principal's work and not necessarily of how the principal might support them, or of how the principal's actions may affect their own work.

### **6. The mediated relationship: 'First, I go to the closest person...'**

In the third storied emotional distance, the relationship with the principal was represented as mediated by the teaching community or by the school as an organisation, where 'mediated' signifies that the relationship with the principal is not direct. Instead, their presence is felt through the teaching community—that is, by teachers inhabiting intermediate positions in the hierarchical structure or affecting the (relational) atmosphere of the school. Here, the distance in terms of emotional geographies is a) political (how the principal uses power to lead the school); b) professional (owing to the organizational structure of the school); and c) moral (as the emotional atmosphere of the school depends in part on whether the principal can convince teachers that they share the same values and ideas about the moral purpose of the work).

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### *6.1 The organisation keeps the principal distant*

One beginning teacher described the organisational realities of her school as follows.

*'I have talked with them [the principals] directly. They are working in the same staff room, after all. But as to whether I'm directly connected to them...I usually turn to the teacher sitting next to me when I need help, or ask the leader of the academic year, and if the situation is difficult enough, the academic head reports the situation to the principals. In really urgent and serious cases, I go directly to the vice principal. It actually took me three years to realize that I can do that'.* (Kusari-sensei, first interview)

This extract shows how the organisational realities of the school shape the formation of relationships by guiding teachers' thinking and actions. The beginning teacher-principal relationship is not just a relationship between two individuals but a way of being and acting in a specific cultural environment, with beginning teachers socialised into expectations related to interaction during their first years (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Miyajima, 2008). The principal is not approached directly by the beginning teacher other than in special circumstances, and Kusari-sensei's description of the necessary conditions (using linguistic markers such as 'buts and ifs') tells us that the organisational and social realities of the school are quite complex.

The relative importance of colleagues and principal for the beginning teacher's work are further illustrated in this extract from Sugawara-sensei, reflecting the importance of her new principal.

*'Relationships with the administration [vice principal and principal] are important, but relationships with teachers from the same grade level are extremely important'.* (Sugawara-sensei, second interview)

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Sugawara-sensei had changed schools between the interviews, leaving a school where the principal had been really supportive in her time of need. At the new school, the principal had remained distant, probably because it was her second school, and she was not seen to be in need of much support (see Wakimoto & Chôshi, 2015). Granted that collegial relations are known to influence teachers' other relationships, such as with their students ([Author 1] & [Author 2], 2016), it was still surprising to hear how Sugawara-sensei perceived the relative importance of colleagues and principal. For her, the relationship with a really supportive principal in a time of need was very meaningful but was still less important than her relationship with her closest colleagues. Where the relationship with the principal is not supportive, it is natural to turn to others for help. But even when the principal is close and supportive, close colleagues typically play a much greater role as sources of help, consultation and emotional support in everyday work (see Yamazaki, 1994).

Another indicator that relationships with colleagues are more meaningful for beginning teachers than those with principals is how they talked at length about their colleagues in describing the school as a social environment; in many of the interviews, principals were mentioned only briefly and often had to be asked about. For instance, well into the second interview with Ami-sensei, we were talking at length about relationships with colleagues in her current and previous schools. Although she had briefly mentioned the principals a few times, she was surprised when the issue was explicitly raised: '*Oh, the relationships with both of them are really good*'. This suggests that while relationships with principals are often unproblematic and not easily recalled, students and colleagues are more central to the teachers' work.

Both the physical setting and organisational structure of the school contribute to colleagues' central role. When Japanese teachers are not teaching, they work in the staff room: planning lessons, completing managerial tasks and communicating with colleagues.

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Teachers in the same academic year sit in ‘*islands*’, with their desks pushed together, making communication and sharing information easy (Ahn, 2014). These groups are led by experienced teachers (*gakunen shunin*), who play an important role as middle-leaders, filtering decisions made by the administration and taking the teachers’ concerns to the administration as needed (Shimahara, 2002). The other teachers in these ‘islands’ are typically their closest colleagues during both formal and informal meetings, and the participating teachers referred frequently to the significance of this arrangement.

The more experienced senior teachers play an especially important role in beginning teachers’ work, as they are expected to be mentors. Teachers from other ‘islands’ are not physically far away, but communicating with them may require an effort; as Sugawara-sensei (second interview) reported, even talking with those sitting directly behind one can sometimes be bothersome, and a conscious effort was needed to build good relationships with those people. In the two previous extracts, organisational distance is reflected in the physical arrangement, even among colleagues. Although colleagues and principal might be physically close, approaching them in this kind of environment means more than just crossing the physical space, as the difficulty of communicating with those further away is likely to be compounded by an accompanying emotional distance.

In terms of emotional geographies, the political distance between the beginning teacher and principal tends to expand because of the separation by several levels of hierarchy, and communication is filtered through teachers occupying the positions between (see Hargreaves, 2001). The division of tasks and the clearly defined roles can also be understood as conditioning the professional distance between beginning teachers and principal.

### ***6.2 The principal’s responsibility for creating atmosphere***

As the principal plays little part in the induction phase and is busy from very early on with

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other tasks and physical settings, those physically close to beginning teachers also become important sources of professional and emotional support, and so the distance to the principal grows. Nevertheless, the principal's presence is felt, as indicated by one beginning teacher discussing what happens when the principal changes.

*“The principals have a strong effect on the atmosphere of the school. Good principals, who think about us, get people on their side and willing to work hard for them. With bad principals, it's like, “What on earth is he on about again?””* (Satô-sensei, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

This extract illustrates that beginning teachers are very keen readers of the school atmosphere and situation, and they figure it out quite quickly if the poor atmosphere is due to the non-efforts of the principal. A good principal uses leadership skills to unify teachers to work together for the best of the school; so much importance is placed on collegial relationships that teachers cannot function well without them (see Ahn, 2014; Shimahara, 2002), and both the atmosphere within the teaching community and the role of the principal become key issues.

In negative examples such as the next extract describing Ariyama-sensei's experience of different schools and their atmospheres, principals were perceived as being incompetent, or bad collegial relationships were attributed to bad leadership skills.

*‘When schools have a bad atmosphere, the principals are almost always also bad. With good principals, it's different. Where teachers were on bad terms with each other, everyone hated the principal as well. Those principals don't typically care whether the teachers hate them or not, and perhaps they think it's ok as long as they please those above them’.* (Ariyama-sensei, second interview)

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In the above extracts, the principal is held directly responsible in very strong terms for the atmosphere of the school. The relationship is perhaps depicted a little naïvely; it is important to remember that, in reality, such relationships are more complex, and a binary division of principals into good and bad is inadvisable. However, the emotions associated with these experiences are meaningful, and the teachers have their reasons for speaking in such a fashion. While it is possible that the atmosphere and collegial relationships might be bad even if the principal did their best to change the situation, the expectation is clear; teachers look to the principal to ensure collegial working conditions that they feel comfortable with. When the principal succeeded in creating a good atmosphere and things were going smoothly, the relationship aroused no strong feelings; when there were problems, the relationship was characterised as disappointing or tainted by antipathy.

### **7. Discussion**

These findings present a nuanced picture of the principal's strong role in terms of political and professional geographies, while in Hargreaves' (2001b) original research on emotional distance, principals were seen mainly as sources of positive appraisal and camaraderie – in other words, the moral distance of the emotional geographies was emphasised. These findings also illustrate that the relationships between beginning teachers and principals are not predominantly one-on-one, highlighting the significance of the surrounding teacher community. What may look like a relationship between principal and beginning teacher is actually between the principal and the teacher community to which the beginning teacher happens to belong. The relationship with the principal can be said to be multifaceted; in many ways, the principal is often quite distant from the beginning teacher in the everyday life of the school, where close colleagues play a more central role. However, the findings indicate that the principal remains meaningful for the beginning teacher in many ways—for example, they



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help beginning teachers by easing parental pressure, in a way that colleagues cannot. In earlier research, the principal as administrator has been seen to create supporting structures in the school (Roberson & Roberson, 2009), clearing challenges that beginning teachers face in quite direct fashion (Ingersoll, 2002). In the present case, however, principals were described as fulfilling this support task indirectly by creating conditions in which teachers could build good emotional relationships among themselves.

While many of the participants described their relationship with the principal as quite personal (like the teacher who described the principal as a father-like figure), this personal distance also related to the organisational and cultural dimensions of the work. In some stories, the voices from these two dimensions overlapped and were hard to separate. For example, the principal's role of 'working behind the scenes' and maintaining a distance from the teacher has its roots in the sociocultural tendency of the Japanese to emphasise the maintenance of harmony in workplace relationships (Genzberger, 1994). This avoids placing others in a position where they might lose face (Rice, 2004) and reflects the professional norm of teachers not commenting directly on each other's work (e.g. Shimahara, 2002). However, the stories also tell us about the particular organisation and the style of its leader, as illustrated by the two examples of a principal trying to please parents while also protecting the beginning teacher, but reaching a different solution.

### **8. Evaluation and implications of the research**

The phenomenon explored here is of importance beyond the Japanese context; although the specifics may change, the basic setting of schools, teachers and their principals remains broadly similar. Here, representative extracts from the research material give participants a voice and maximize the transparency of the research process, enabling the reader to assess the applicability of these results to other contexts (see Mertova & Webster, 2007). Joint

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analysis of the stories made it possible to enhance interpretations and deepen the analysis.

We can further evaluate the validity of this research by taking account of the conditions influencing participants' narratives (Polkinghorne, 2007). The beginning teachers had their own reasons for talking about their work and their relationships in the way they did, and for characterizing themselves as certain kinds of beginning teachers. Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach and Zilber (1998) argued that narration takes place within different spheres, each affecting in different ways what gets told. In the sphere of immediate inter-subjective relationships, the fact that [author 1] was known to the principal may sometimes have influenced how and what teachers narrated, making the narrative a lot 'cleaner'. Again, when talking about the principals of their previous schools, teachers described them in a more critical light.

The collective social field that teachers narrated was the school and rarely touched on teachers' personal lives. Their words echoed the structures and social relationships in the school, especially because, as a foreign researcher, the first author did not share the same socio-historical context and the teachers as narrators had to provide extra explanations that were very informative. This explication of cultural context is essential in understanding the dynamics of the personal and the collective in a given story (Tuval-Maschiach, 2008). For example, without proper knowledge of the cultural sphere, the connection between waiting for the principal to initiate more casual talk and the cultural roles of senior and junior would have been missed.

Although principals were not always described as the most important persons in the school, participants reported sensing their presence and influence in one way or another. Based on these findings, it is clear that principals play a key role in creating supportive working conditions and a positive atmosphere. Exploring the relationship with the principal from the point of view of the beginning teacher illuminates how leadership in schools is experienced, with implications for both teacher education and the training of educational

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leaders. With regard to teacher education, discussing and reflecting on the relationship with the principals may help to ease entry to the fields, as there is a need for beginning teachers to learn to understand and operate in this often complicated relational and emotional environment. In short, they need to practise the skills of micropolitical literacy (see Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Similarly, in training educational leaders, relationships should be discussed and problematised to raise awareness of the influence of a principal's words and actions on teachers' work. As the relationship between the beginning teacher and the principal is also important for teacher retention, further research would clearly be valuable.

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