



Service climate in New Zealand English language centres

New Zealand English language centres

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to report on the findings of a study into staff perceptions of service climate in New Zealand English language centres (ELCs) offering ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses.

Design/methodology/approach – A 71-item questionnaire based on a Likert scale was used to survey non-management teaching and administrative staff about their perceptions of the climate quality in their institutions.

Findings – The paper finds that staff in New Zealand ELCs demonstrated a positive perception of the service climate quality in their institutions. Service orientation was viewed as the most positive aspect of ELC service climate. Management aspects were not so positively perceived. The least positively-perceived aspect of the service climate was resourcing. Significant differences in climate perceptions were identified among staff sub-groups, and between staff in different ELC types.

Research limitations/implications – The limitations of convenience samples are acknowledged. Further research is advocated into management and administrative aspects of ELCs operating in the private sector, as well as into the operation of other educational institutions in a commercial environment.

Practical implications – The paper shows that ELCs are doing well in terms of “soft” service management areas, e.g. service orientation and client focus, but need to pay more attention to the “hard” areas such as resourcing and basic management competencies.

Originality/value – ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) administration and management is a highly under-researched area. This is one of the few pieces of empirical research in this sector, and thus represents a unique contribution to the literature. The findings will be of interest to anyone working and/or researching in the area of ELC/ESOL management, or in the area of private education provision.

Keywords Services, English language, New Zealand

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Background

A wide range of schools, colleges and universities operate in the New Zealand public domain to service the educational needs of the 4 million population. These include, for instance, some 335 secondary schools and 20 polytechnics or institutes of technology (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2006). At the same time, however, there is a thriving private education sector which operates in the commercial domain: currently around 800 Private Training Establishments (PTEs) in nearly 1,300 locations are registered with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2006a). PTEs sell courses to paying clients. Their programmes cover the broad spectrum of education and training in areas such as literacy, maths tutoring, information technology, agricultural training, industry training, foreign and second language tuition, religious studies, sports coaching and hospitality studies. The

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research described in this paper examined the organisational climate of one of these private education providers, English language centres (ELCs).

Organisational climate

At the very least since the work of Mayo (1933), Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939) led to the emergence of the Human Relations School of management thought, the environment that people work in has been regarded as a key influence on their behaviour, specifically in terms of explicating their motivation and performance in organisations. Managers and researchers, particularly in the areas of organisational behaviour and psychology, have been interested in investigating the inherent nature of organisations in order to capture those elements that may influence incumbent behaviour and thus the outputs of the firm, with a view to improving productivity. Thus, interest grew in the concept of climate in the sense of an environmental feature or characteristic that affects the behaviour of persons and groups and to which they are sensitive (Tagiuri, 1968, p. 18).

The concept of climate as applied to organisational environments originates in Lewinian field theory (Lewin, 1936, 1951). The first mention in an organisational setting is commonly taken to be Lewin *et al.* (1939), in his study of how different leadership styles create social climates, which go on to affect productivity (Schneider, 1990). Subsequent work was carried out by: Lewin (1951), who described the need to consider the situational and contextual factors that influence behaviour and developed the equation $B = f(P, E)$, that is, behaviour is a function of the person and the environment; Fleishman (1953) in his study of leadership climate in a training context; Morse and Reimer (1956) in their study of participation and decision-making among employees; Argyris (1958), in his study on group dynamics; Pace and Stern (1958) in their study of climates in colleges in the USA; McGregor (1960) who expounded the concept of “Theory X” and “Theory Y” managerial climates; Likert (1961) and Barker (1965) who made qualitative observations of natural organisational settings; and Halpin and Croft (1962), who examined the organisational climate of US schools. In Tagiuri and Litwin (1968), their work led to a consensus forming around a confirmation of Litwin and Stringer (1968), their notion of climate as a perception or a reflection of the way people in organisations perceive and come to describe the characteristics of their environment (Verbeke *et al.*, 1998).

Since the emergence of climate as an organisational concept, numerous climate studies have been carried out in a wide range of industry and organisation types. One strand of such research has focused on climate in schools, colleges and universities. Educational climate researchers have focused on climate type classification and in particular on identifying “positive”, “healthy” or “open”, as opposed to “negative”, “unhealthy” or “closed” climates (Deer, 1980; Halpin and Croft, 1962; Hoy *et al.*, 1991). Much educational climate research has focused on US, British or Australian public or state school, college or university systems (Deer, 1980; Halpin and Croft, 1962; Hoy *et al.*, 1991). Some studies of school climate have tended to focus on a range of generic issues such as school discipline, parental involvement, or the use and effectiveness of standardised national achievement tests. Others have tended to be deconstructed, focusing on specific domains encompassing quasi-societal themes such as diversity, multiculturalism or racial issues (e.g. Heggins, 2001; Pewewardy and Frey, 2002; Pfeifer and Schneider, 1974).

English language centres

Such studies have done much to help us to understand climate themes in schools, colleges and universities in the public domain. However, they may be less useful when it comes to examining the environments of educational institutions that follow a commercial model. English language centres (ELCs) exemplify this type of educational enterprise. Set up as a response to an increasing demand for English language proficiency, ELCs are the mainstay of a major global educational service industry, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), which is particularly well established in English-speaking countries such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand. ELCs sell ESOL courses to a non-native speaker, student clientele. Typically, they are either privately-owned companies or enterprises set up by tertiary institutions. The core business of ELCs is the provision of English language tuition by teachers, usually with specialist TESOL (the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages) qualifications. However, the service package may include homestay accommodation and leisure components. ELCs routinely undertake pastoral care and guardianship responsibilities, particularly if younger students are involved. The effectiveness of the language-learning component of the service may depend as much on client aptitude, motivation, industry, and attitude, as on the skills, professionalism and personality of the teacher providers. However, the quality of ancillary services such as homestay accommodation may also contribute to the overall perception of the success of the language study experience. ELC service is subject to fluctuations in demand; it is provided to a mix of individual clients and groups of clients of varying sizes, depending on demand and client profile, as well as on the strategy of the organisation; it is usually a one-off experience for clients, of longer or shorter duration, ranging from weeks to, possibly, years.

Although the studies of climate in public sector educational institutions may appear to have some relevance to a study of climate in commercial English language centres, the two organisation types are dissimilar in a number of respects. Differences include the public persona on the one hand versus the commercial imperative on the other, the relative ownership and structure of the organisations, relative institution sizes, the range of subjects taught, the nature and duration of the student client's association with the institution, student age parameters, student characteristics and cultural backgrounds, class sizes, teaching staff qualifications and backgrounds, as well as modes of assessment and teaching philosophy. Intrinsic features of the public schools, colleges and universities studied in traditional educational climate studies differ so markedly, in fact, from those of privately-owned English language centres that it is difficult to establish any commonality, apart from that of providing an educational service.

Both in practice, and in terms of organisation theory, ELCs are service organisations. By their nature, they not only fit neatly within the definition of a service as "an act or performance that one party can offer another and one that is essentially intangible" (Lovelock and Patterson, 1998, p. 5), but also possess classic features of services such as heterogeneity – the potential for variability in the quality of the service provided; inseparability – the fact that most services are simultaneously provided and consumed; and client involvement in the production of the service (Lovelock and Patterson, 1998; Walker, 1998). ELC staff, are essentially service providers (Walker, 2000a). Johnson and Owens (2005) maintained that school types are

human service organisations, a key feature of the success of which is the nature of staff personal attributes. This notion has its parallel in a services concept that is central to the success of service operations such as ELCs, namely service orientation (Cran, 1994; Walker, 2001), that is, the attitudes, behaviours and personal attributes of service providers (Hogan *et al.*, 1984) that are linked with an innate desire to provide excellent service to customers and clients. Service orientation is widely regarded as an indispensable feature of effective service operations (e.g. Brown *et al.*, 2002; Dale and Wooler, 1991; McBride *et al.*, 1997).

Another key issue for ELCs is the service milieu, that is, a particular atmosphere, tone or ambience indicative of the strength of the service imperative within a particular service organisation (Schneider and Bowen, 1995; Walker, 2002). The service milieu of ELCs has been shown to be a significant influence on clients' psychological and emotional well-being, as well as on their motivation to succeed in their studies (Walker, 2001).

Given the commercially-oriented, service focus of English language centres, therefore, the research described here eschewed the methodology of traditional school climate studies and took instead as its theoretical foundation the concept of service climate.

Service climate, has been defined as:

Employee perceptions of the practices, procedures and behaviours that get rewarded, supported and expected with regard to customer service and customer service quality (Schneider *et al.*, 1998, p. 151).

Much service climate research has attempted to identify antecedents of a positive service climate in service organisations. This exists when employees perceive that management regard quality service as important and support and reward employees who deliver such service (Schneider *et al.*, 1998). A number of key prerequisites for a positive service climate have been proposed in the literature. These include mutual support among departments and colleagues and facilitative conditions such as sharing information with staff, providing feedback, appropriate manager behaviours, training, and the removal of obstacles to the provision of excellent service (Johlke and Duhan, 2000; Johnson, 1996; Schneider and Bowen, 1993; King and Garey, 1997; Schneider *et al.*, 1998); the facilitation of personal career development and planning; of newcomer entry to the organisation through socialization and training; and of job performance, plus the fostering of an awareness of working for an organisation that has a high status and image in the community (Schneider, 1994). Pugh *et al.* (2002) synthesised two decades of research into eight drivers of service climate, namely: customer service orientation/service quality emphasis; management support of staff to facilitate service delivery; the hiring of motivated, qualified staff and maintaining staffing levels; training staff to provide required knowledge and skills; rewarding and recognising staff for service performance; teamwork; support systems that remove obstacles to service delivery; customer feedback solicited and used to improve service delivery.

A measure of service climate quality would be based on employees' perceptions of how elements such as these were operationalised as practices or behaviours resulting in the delivery of superior service.

The ESOL sector has been the subject of prodigious amounts of academic research worldwide, the vast majority of which has addressed the area of ESOL teaching

methodology and/or related linguistic issues. However, administrative and management aspects of ESOL programmes in English language centres have not been accorded the same level of interest and remain, particularly in terms of empirical research, by and large, unexplored. While service climate research increasingly examines a wider range of work contexts (e.g. Andrews and Rogelberg (2001), in their study of service climate in small businesses), that of English language centres has not been one of them. As a result, little or nothing is known about how ELC staff, both teachers and non-teachers, perceive their service environment. The fact that so many questions remain unanswered provided the impetus for the research described here.

Some of these unanswered questions relate to issues surrounding the provision of a traditionally public benefit within a commercial environment. For instance, the importance of service orientation has been long demonstrated to be a key feature of a range of commercially successful service and even manufacturing organisations (e.g. Burchell *et al.*, 1999; O'Connor and Shewchuk, 1995; Homburg *et al.*, 2002; Wright *et al.*, 1997). But it is not known to what extent the various facets of service orientation are prevalent in ELCs, in the minds of staff, nor how robust they are, compared to other aspects of the service provision, nor how prepared professional ESOL teachers are to embrace the roles that are expected of service providers in a commercial environment. One such role, for instance, is that of marketer. Given the long-term and personalised nature of many service encounters, service providers are increasingly expected to be “part-time marketers” for their organisations (Grönroos, 1990, p. 176), engaging in relationship management activities in addition to their allotted technical functions (Laing and McKee, 2001). However, studies of health, accountancy and tertiary teaching (Laing and McKee, 2001; Stratemeyer and Hampton, 2001), have reported a lack of commitment to the marketing role among professionals working in these areas. In particular, professionals who interpret the marketing function in relatively narrow terms may feel distaste at being obliged to become marketers (Laing and McKee, 2001). While Kingsley (1998) felt that ESOL teachers, likewise, should function partly as marketers, it is not known to what extent teachers in ELCs accept this role as part of their job description.

An obligation to focus on commercial aspects at the expense of professional integrity can impact negatively on the professionalism of professional staff (Roberts, 2001). This implies that in organisations like ELCs, where teaching staff must reconcile a professional ethic with commercial priorities, there is potential for a discrepancy between what is commercially and what is professionally desirable. Anecdotally, some ELC managers might be perceived as not being fully attuned to the professional and ethical constraints of teaching English as a second language, particularly if they do not hold a teaching qualification themselves. They might give commercial considerations precedence over educational requirements by, for instance, taking on unqualified staff or by creating over-large classes and mixing students of different proficiency levels to cover a temporary surge in demand (Walker, 2000b). Such practices could bring managers into conflict with ESOL teachers, especially if the latter feel, in line with other professionals (Haywood-Farmer and Nollet, 1994; Stratemeyer and Hampton, 2001), that their specialist knowledge, qualifications and expertise put them in a better position than their managers to assess the needs of their students.

Another area of interest relates to the ELC manager's role, attitudes and behaviours in a services context. The responsibility for the efficacy of strategic, organisational and

administrative aspects of the ELC service lies with ELC managers since planning, organisation and control are classical management functions (Fayol, 1949). This duty includes formulating and communicating a service strategy, setting up structures and systems to serve the strategy and monitoring performance. It also implies a duty to meet the requirements of accrediting institutions such as Accreditation UK (British Council, 2006), the Australian National ELT Accreditation Scheme (NEAS Australia, 2006), or the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2006b), by ensuring, for instance, that ESOL teachers are suitably qualified and trained, and that the ELC's policies, resources and procedures comply with the framework standards. The importance of manager support and reward mechanisms for service staff is likewise a common services climate theme (Kopelman *et al.*, 1990; Koys and DeCotiis, 1991; Litwin and Stringer, 1968; Pugh *et al.*, 2002). Manager reward structures that favour professional behaviour have been shown to lead to positive outcomes for professional staff and for the organisation (Boyd *et al.*, 2001). The key role of effective manager communication in services is self-evident (e.g. Kopelman *et al.*, 1990; Johnson, 1996; Koys and DeCotiis, 1991), especially since forms of manager communication with service staff can influence staff outcomes (Johlke and Duhan, 2000). Perceived manager performance in these areas of ELC service is therefore of interest.

In common with all organisations, ELC workforces are composed of sub-groups of employees. Teachers make up by far the largest sub-group in ELCs and traditionally, the ESOL profession has been populated predominantly by women. One New Zealand statistic (Haddock, 1998), for instance, put the proportion of mainly tertiary ESOL female teachers at 87 percent. Women and men have been shown to have significantly different perceptions of some aspects of the work climate in their organisations (Kircaldy and Athanasou, 1999). Professional subcultures and administrative subcultures exist in a professional services environment and cultural conflict between them can have tangible consequences for the organisation (Hofstede, 1998). The same might apply to staff who have varying lengths of service with their organisations and staff who are employed either on a part-time or on a full time basis. Organisation size (Sveiby and Simons, 2002) and type may also have a role to play in forming ELC staff perceptions of the climate in their organisations.

Methodology

Organisational climate is usually measured using a survey questionnaire which asks employees to rate organisational attributes on a Likert scale. Climate quality (Lindell and Brandt, 2000) is determined by the proximity of the mean to the positive endpoint of the scale. Thus on a Likert scale with ratings from 1 to 5, the closer the mean is to 5, the higher the perceived climate quality. Such a questionnaire was developed using findings from ELC staff and client focus group discussions on the key characteristics of superior service, combined with insights from the climate and the services literature. The questionnaire surveyed ELC non-management teaching and administrative staff about their perceptions of the climate quality of eleven service dimensions (Table I) in their institutions.

The 11 service climate dimensions comprised 71 items and used a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with a do not know (DK) option (see Appendix for sample questionnaire items). Two open-ended questions asked

ELC service climate dimensions	No. of items	Dimension focus: extent to which ...
Management service practices	6	Management effectively plans, organises, leads and controls in the service area
Management communication	5	Management consults with and informs staff on service issues
Management support	6	Management encourages and recognises staff efforts, fosters cooperation, provides resources
Staff service practices	6	Staff understand their service role and are able to provide superior service
Client focus	13	The service provided is focused on client needs and on creating client satisfaction
Staff service ethos	3	Staff are personally committed to providing superior service (service orientation)
Staff personal attributes	5	Staff possess the personal attributes required to provide superior service (service orientation)
Staff concern for clients	9	Staff are personally interested in and devoted to their clients (service orientation)
Employment issues	6	Work conditions are commensurate with the creation of superior service
Resourcing	3	Staff are adequately resourced for the provision of superior service
Staff estimate of client evaluation of the service	9	Staff are aware of how clients assess various aspects of the service
Total	71	

Table I.
ELC service climate
questionnaire: dimension
content

respondents to cite desirable ELC service attributes and perceived barriers to superior service.

According to Glick (1985), climate cannot be said to exist in an organisation unless there is employee consensus of an acceptable level on climate perceptions. Some researchers have traditionally assumed that a measure taken using a Likert scale and based on a normal analysis of variance (ANOVA) would be sufficient to demonstrate consensus. However, James *et al.* (1984) pointed out limitations of ANOVA in specific data collection scenarios and proposed the r_{wg} index, an indicator of interrater agreement, as a preferred alternative (James *et al.*, 1993). r_{wg} has been the subject of considerable debate in the literature (e.g. Kozlowski and Hattrup, 1992; Schmidt and Hunter, 1989) but has been employed with some success (Andrews and Rogelberg, 2001; Hater and Bass, 1988; Kozlowski and Hattrup, 1992; Lindell and Brandt, 2000; Schneider and Bowen, 1985). r_{wg} was used here to control for climate consensus.

A total of 30 ELCs participated in the study. This figure amounted to some 40 percent of the total ELCs identified in New Zealand at the time of the survey. In total, 22 were privately owned, and the remaining eight were schools within universities or polytechnics. From a sample of 587 staff, 275 valid responses were obtained, for a 47 percent response rate. A total of 83 percent of responses came from teachers; the remainder came from various administrative staff. Totally, 80 percent of respondents were female; 76 percent of respondents were employed full-time. Of respondents, 63 percent had held their current position for a year or less, while 10 percent of respondents had been in their current position for more than five years.

Findings

The climate data was examined for evidence of extreme skewness; reliability was checked with Cronbach's Alpha (Cronbach, 1951). Intercorrelations between the dimensions of each scale were determined. A mild skewness towards positive scores was observed ($\alpha = 0.98$). Alphas for individual climate dimensions are displayed in Table II.

Factor analysis indicated a three-factor solution, which explained 54.8 percent of the variance (Component 1: 23.2 percent; Component 2: 21.2 percent; Component 3: 10.4 percent). Approximately half of the variables loaded on Component 1 and/or Component 2 and approximately one-third on Component three. These three components were designated: ELC staff service orientation towards clients; ELC manager service practices; ELC staff work conditions. r_{wg} (James *et al.*, 1984) values were calculated in terms of the respondent data for each ELC. The item means lay within a positive range of +0.38 to +0.80. In terms of the r_{wg} parameters of -1.0 and $+1.0$, this result confirmed moderate to high levels of staff consensus on the perceived climate quality of their institutions.

Overview of findings from service climate dimensions

As can be seen from Table III, staff had an overall positive perception of ELC service climate ($M = 3.72$). The three service climate dimensions that constitute service orientation, staff service ethos, staff personal attributes and staff concern for clients, were the most positively scored in the survey, while employment issues scored least positively. Detailed findings of note from the individual dimensions in descending order of climate quality strength are as follows:

- (1) *Staff personal attributes*: There was 98 percent agreement/strong agreement that staff adopt a friendly manner towards clients ($M = 4.6$), making this the highest rated item in the aggregated findings. A total of 97 percent felt staff empathised with clients' problems in an unfamiliar environment ($M = 4.4$) and 95 percent felt staff showed patience when clients had problems communicating ($M = 4.5$).
- (2) *Staff concern for clients*: Strongest agreement (93 percent) was found on staff efforts to establish rapport with clients ($M = 4.4$) and staff efforts to support

ELC service climate dimension subscales	α
Management service practices	0.91
Management communication	0.86
Management support	0.91
Staff service practices	0.80
Client focus	0.95
Staff service ethos	0.87
Staff personal attributes	0.93
Staff concern for clients	0.93
Employment issues	0.84
Resourcing	0.84
Estimate of client evaluation of service	0.90

Table II.
Cronbach alphas for
service climate scale
dimensions

Dimensions respondents perceptions of ...	M	Rank	Percent disagree/strongly disagree ^a	Percent neither agree nor disagree ^a	Percent agree/strongly agree ^a
Management service practices	3.56	6	18.53	19.63	61.85
Management communication	3.40	9	22.68	20.16	57.22
Management support	3.54	7	19.92	19.30	60.77
Staff service practices	3.69	5	14.7	17.78	67.55
Client focus	3.97	4	7.68	16.62	75.68
Staff service ethos	4.19	3	3.70	10.60	85.70
Staff personal attributes	4.49	1	1.18	3.98	94.84
Staff concern for clients	4.20	2	2.64	11.52	85.84
Employment issues	3.09	11	32.88	22.10	44.98
Resourcing	3.45	8	27.63	12.27	60.10
<i>Respondents estimate of their clients' evaluation of the service provided by their ELC</i>			Percent worse/far worse than they expected	Percent about what they expected	Percent better/far better than they expected
Estimate of client evaluation	3.33	10	13.30	44.62	42.10

Note: ^aOwing to rounding, category percentages do not total 100 percent

Table III.
ELC staff perceptions of
service climate quality –
dimension means

students to achieve English language goals ($M = 4.4$), while 92 percent of respondents felt staff were sensitive to the needs of students from other cultures ($M = 4.4$) and 89 percent agreed/strongly agreed that staff were willing to help clients adjust to a new country ($M = 4.2$). Although staff willingness to assist clients outside working hours recorded the lowest mean ($M = 3.9$), this item still attracted 69 percent of staff agreement.

- (3) *Staff service ethos*: Just over 90 percent of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that staff felt personally responsible for service quality ($M = 4.3$) and 89 percent felt staff were committed to providing superior service ($M = 4.3$).
- (4) *Client focus*: Approximately 90 percent of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that it was easy for a client to access a member of staff for help ($M = 4.3$) and nearly 86 percent perceived the ELC environment to be relaxed and friendly ($M = 4.2$). A total of 85 percent believed that clients received ethical treatment ($M = 4.2$), while 84 percent were in agreement that client complaints were taken seriously ($M = 4.2$) and 78 percent believed clients received a high standard of professional instruction ($M = 4.1$) – only 7 percent did not. By contrast, only 61 percent agreed/strongly agreed that the service clients received matched the description in publicity materials ($M = 3.6$).
- (5) *Staff service practices*: 82 percent of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that staff actively supported each other to produce superior service ($M = 4.1$) and 76 percent felt staff had the skills to provide superior service ($M = 3.9$). But only 41 percent viewed marketing as part of staff's service role, while 35 percent perceived that it was not ($M = 3.1$).
- (6) *Management service practices*: 71 percent agreed/strongly agreed that their managers had a sound grasp of TESOL aspects of the service ($M = 3.8$) – only 16 percent felt this was not the case. In total, 61 percent reported that their manager regularly monitored service standards, and 53 percent said that their managers ensured they (the staff) knew how to deliver superior service.
- (7) *Management support*: 67 percent of respondents felt that their managers supported professional development ($M = 3.7$), while 66 percent perceived that their managers encouraged staff in their efforts ($M = 3.7$) but only 42 percent agreed/strongly agreed that their managers recognised their efforts to provide superior service ($M = 3.1$).
- (8) *Resourcing*: Almost 70 percent of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that the teaching resources were of a satisfactory standard ($M = 3.7$) but only 53 percent felt that facilities such as classrooms and toilets were satisfactory ($M = 3.3$).
- (9) *Management communication*: 63 percent of respondents reported that managers kept them informed about issues affecting the organisation ($M = 3.5$) and 52 percent said that their managers provided them with feedback on their performance ($M = 3.3$).
- (10) *Staff estimate of client evaluation of service*: Almost 45 percent of respondents thought their clients found the service as they expected, 42 percent felt that their clients found it better or far better than they expected and just over 13 percent thought their clients found it worse or far worse than they expected. The

strongest item was teachers, 55 percent of respondents estimating that their clients found their teachers better or far better than expected ($M = 3.6$). The weakest item was facilities, only 28 percent estimating their clients found the facilities better or far better than expected ($M = 2.96$).

- (11) *Employment issues*: The three least positive aspects of work in the minds of staff respondents were stress ($M = 2.55$), pay ($M = 2.77$), and job security ($M = 2.94$). A total of 52 percent viewed their jobs as stressful, only 33 percent felt that they received fair remuneration for their work, and only 39 percent felt they had job security. On the other hand, 72 percent of respondents perceived the work environment to be harmonious ($M = 3.77$).

Barriers to service and key attributes of service

Respondents were asked to name up to three barriers that prevented them from providing the level of service they desired and three key attributes of superior ELC service. The data obtained was content-analysed using a frequency count. The barriers identified from the data fell into the following five broad themes, in descending order of frequency:

- (1) The poor quality of the physical work environment.
- (2) Problems with service delivery.
- (3) The nature of the ELC management.
- (4) The employment conditions.
- (5) Poor communication/lack of communication.

The suggested key attributes of superior service spanned these seven broad themes, in descending order of frequency:

- (1) Staff personal attributes.
- (2) The service delivery.
- (3) The physical work environment.
- (4) The ELC management.
- (5) Employment conditions.
- (6) The ELC milieu.
- (7) Communication.

The top ten individual barriers and top ten attributes in terms of frequency are presented in Table IV.

Comparing staff sub-groups

The data was subjected to analysis of variance (ANOVA) in terms of gender, area of responsibility (teaching or administration), employment status (full-time or part-time) and length of time employed at the ELC. η^2 (eta squared) was used as an indicator of association strength between variables. For gender and employment status, significance ($p < 0.05$) could be demonstrated only on a few variables. However, area of responsibility and length of time in the job each accounted for significant differences ($p < 0.05$) on a quarter of the items in the survey, mainly in the areas of management practices and perceptions of client satisfaction.

Table IV.
ELC staff perceptions of
barriers to and attributes
of superior service
(ranked)

Rank	Attributes of superior service	Rank	Barriers to superior service
1	Desirable teacher traits, e.g. skilled, experienced, well-qualified	1	Inadequate/lack of equipment and facilities
2	Client focus/service orientation, e.g. meeting client needs, personal service, concern for client welfare	2	Poor planning/organisation
3	Desirable traits for all ELC staff, e.g. teamwork, dedication, professionalism	3	Inferior/lack of teaching resources
4	Desirable ELC manager traits, e.g. supportive attitude, ability to clarify organisational goals and policies	4 =	Inappropriate staffing practices, e.g. hiring of unqualified staff
5	Provision of superior teaching/learning resources	4 =	Inappropriate management style, e.g. autocratic behaviour
6	Superior organisation and administration	6	Counterproductive management practices, e.g. lack of performance appraisal
7	Provision of superior facilities and equipment	7 =	Lack of/poor communication, e.g. manager-staff and staff-staff
8	Positive atmosphere, e.g. professional, service milieu	7 =	Lack of space/overcrowding in the ELC
9	Effective communication, e.g. manager-staff and staff-staff	9	Inadequate pay
10	Provision of professional development	10	Lack of professional development

In terms of area of responsibility, administrative staff consistently scored higher on their perceptions of the service climate in their ELCs than teachers. In particular, administrative staff had a significantly stronger perception than teachers that managers led by example ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$), talked to staff about the importance of superior service ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$) and consulted with staff on ways to improve service delivery ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.05$); that staff had a marketing role ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$); and that they had job security ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$). Although the difference was less marked, administrative staff had a significantly stronger perception than teachers that managers had a sound grasp of TESOL aspects of the service ($p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$). Their estimate of client evaluation of ELC service was higher than that of teachers, particularly in terms of client satisfaction with service procedures ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$), with homestay ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.07$) and with the service as a whole ($p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$).

In terms of length of time in the job, respondents who had been there longer than two years scored modestly, but significantly, higher on about a quarter of the items in the survey than those who had served up to a year. One group in particular, those who had served from seven months to a year, had the most negative perception of the service climate in their institutions. Differences were evident in the areas of resourcing, lesson quality, communication with clients and estimate of client evaluation of the service (all $p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$). Although these differences were not large, they pointed to a general trend in the findings, namely that the longer respondents had been employed by an institution, the more positive their perceptions of the service climate appeared to be.

Comparing English language centre type and size

The data from tertiary and privately-owned ELCs was compared using an independent samples *t*-test. Around a third of the items in the survey, principally in the areas of client focus, staff service ethos and concern for clients, demonstrated a significant difference at either the $p = 0.05$ or $p = 0.01$ level. With only one exception, the climate ratings of tertiary ELC staff were higher than those of staff in privately-owned ELCs. Tertiary staff rated their service climate higher, for instance, on the effectiveness of communication with clients ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$), the friendliness of the environment ($p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$), client ability to access staff for help ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$) and the effectiveness of the complaints procedure ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$), as well as commitment to providing superior service ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$), attention to detail ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$), professionalism ($p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$), cultural sensitivity ($p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$) and client support ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$). The four strongest differences ($p < 0.01$) across the board were on the items:

- (1) The service clients receive closely matches that in publicity materials ($\eta^2 = 0.06$).
- (2) Clients receive ethical treatment ($\eta^2 = 0.06$).
- (3) Clients experience a high standard of professional instruction ($\eta^2 = 0.05$).
- (4) The teaching resources are of a satisfactory standard ($\eta = 0.05$).

However, tertiary staff reported significantly more stress ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$) than their colleagues in the private sector.

In order to explore possible size differences between the ELCs, the 30 institutions in the survey were placed into three size categories according to client numbers, small ($N < 100$), medium ($N = 100-199$) and large ($N > 199$) and the data subjected to an ANOVA. Only five items demonstrated significant variation and no major trends were apparent. There was, therefore, little evidence to support the existence of a difference among small, medium, and large ELCs in terms of the way staff respondents viewed the service climate of their organisations.

Discussion

Staff in New Zealand ELCs have a generally positive perception of the service climate quality in their institutions. The prominence in the literature given to service orientation as a feature of effective service operations is borne out in practice by the fact that service orientation is viewed by staff as the most positive aspect of the ELC service climate, particularly staff personal attributes such as friendliness, helpfulness, patience and professionalism. Staff commitment, personal responsibility, and a concern for client needs and welfare are also strong elements. The fact that survey respondents also cited service orientation themes among the top attributes of superior ELC service (Table IV) underlines not only an awareness of the role of service orientation in their everyday work, but also its importance to the success of the service operation, and to the staff personally. Taken together, the findings confirm the presence in ELCs of a perceived healthy provider-client relationship (Lovelock, 1995) in terms of provider empathy and sensitivity; in terms of boundary spanning roles (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996; Yoon *et al.*, 2001) such as interface and pastoral care/counselling functions; in terms of the ability to establish rapport with clients (Lovelock and Patterson, 1998); and in terms of supporting clients to achieve their

language goals, even extending to an apparent widespread willingness to assist clients outside normal working hours. Concern for clients also figures prominently as a key attribute of superior service cited by staff when it comes to meeting client needs, providing a personal service and looking after client welfare. These issues are particularly significant in a service industry that has a clientele who are mainly, but not exclusively, young people who are sojourners in, or emigrants to, a foreign country. This strongly positive perception of service orientation may imply that service orientation is a common denominator for ELCs in terms of its function as a service provider attribute that ELCs rely on for the generation of client satisfaction.

ELC staff view positively their own service practices in areas such as skill level, role comprehension and intercollegial communication. Collegial support helps counter the frustrations and demands of service provision (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996) and is linked to client satisfaction (Johnson, 1996). The findings show that ELC staff perceive collegial support to be one of the most positive aspects of the service practice in their workplaces. However, compared to other aspects of ELC staff service practice, there is not nearly such a strong perception among ELC staff that marketing is part of their service role. Furthermore, teachers are significantly less likely than non-teachers to perceive marketing to be part of their work. This insight corroborates previous findings (Laing and McKee, 2001; Stratemeyer and Hampton, 2001) about professionals' attitudes to accepting a marketing role. While the exact reasons for this stance remain unclear, the implication is that managers are not clarifying for staff, especially the teachers, the marketing role as a key service provider relationship management activity, as advocated by services best practice. The fact that only half of respondents in the survey reported that their managers ensured they (the staff) knew how to deliver superior service seems to support this inference.

Schneider (1980) found customer focus to be closely linked to customer satisfaction. The findings confirm that ELC staff perceive a strong, positive client focus in their institutions. Although ELC staff are not entirely convinced that their clients get the service promised by their institutions' publicity materials, they have a particularly positive perception of client ability to access staff, of the response to client complaints, of the service milieu, of ethical matters, and of the standard of teaching. Despite this, the weak rating the *estimate* dimension received indicates that ELC staff are more pessimistic about their clients' rating of them and the service they provide than they themselves are about their service provision. ELC staff perceive that clients are most satisfied with the teachers and least satisfied with the facilities.

The importance of tangibles in service operations is undisputed (Bitner, 1992; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988; Schneider and Bowen, 1995). Although ELC staff perceptions of resourcing in their institutions were not in a negative range, this dimension was not particularly strongly rated. Furthermore, respondents cited a lack of equipment and facilities to be number one among the top ten barriers to superior service, while inferior teaching resources and overcrowding also figured prominently as barriers (Table IV). Taken together, these findings lead to the conclusion that in the minds of staff, resources are not a strong point of service provision in New Zealand ELCs.

Although manager service practices, manager communication and manager support do not rate especially highly compared to the other dimensions of ELC service climate, a majority of ELC staff still think managers are doing a good job in these areas. Managers are seen to be effective in planning, procedural and leadership areas of

the service but less effective when it comes to control tasks such as ensuring staff are familiar with the fundamentals of service provision and monitoring service standards. Furthermore, managerial practices were cited by respondents as barriers to superior service, particularly in respect of resourcing, planning, organising, leadership, communication and staffing. The assertion, for instance, that managers hire under-qualified personnel highlights the potential for variability in the quality of the service provision (Wright, 1995) and contrasts with the perception of ELC staff that the provision of qualified and experienced teachers is overwhelmingly the single most important attribute of superior ELC service.

Manager understanding of TESOL work was cited in the preliminary focus groups as a desirable ELC manager attribute, but a lack of understanding of TESOL among managers was also cited in the survey by some respondents as a barrier to excellent service. Given the potential for conflict between managers and teachers over commercial versus educational priorities, it is significant that, according to the findings reported here, a sizeable majority of the ELC staff, most of whom are teachers, perceive that their managers do demonstrate a sound grasp of TESOL aspects of ELC service, while only a small minority believe this not to be the case. However, the teachers, who, it can be argued, should be in a better position to judge, have a markedly more negative view than the administrative staff of this aspect of their managers' performance. Although ELC staff do not have an overall negative perception of manager communication with them, in relation to other aspects of ELC service climate, manager communication does not rate highly. Staff perceive managers to be fairly effective in terms of keeping them informed about organisational issues, but they perceive managers to be less effective when it comes to giving staff feedback on their performance. ELC staff also perceive that they are receiving good levels of support from their managers, particularly in areas such as encouragement, fostering mutual cooperation, and supporting professional development. However, when it comes to giving reward and recognition for a job well done, staff perceive that managers do not do nearly such a good job.

The role of pressure on service staff in terms of work demands and time demands have been acknowledged (Koys and DeCotiis, 1991; Moos, 1974). Although the staff rating for employment issues was the weakest in the survey, it was not a negative result *per se*, and the ELC work environment is still regarded by staff as relatively harmonious. Stress, low pay and lack of job security are particular concerns, but teachers and non-teachers have a considerable difference of opinion on the latter item.

Differences between ELC staff sub-groups in terms of their perceptions of ELC service climate vary in their scope and their intensity. Despite previous research findings to the contrary (Kircaldy and Athanasou, 1999), gender can virtually be discounted as a significant differentiator between ELC staff in terms of their service climate perceptions, as can employment status (full-time, part-time). However, area of responsibility (teacher, administrator) and length of service with an ELC are relevant to some extent. The greatest differences between teachers and non-teachers are evident in their perceptions of their managers and their clients. Administrative staff have a significantly more positive view of management practices and a more optimistic view of how their clients rate them, than do teachers. This may be an indicator of administrative staff's closer involvement with the management side of service operations and a less direct involvement than teachers with clients. Non-teachers also

have a significantly greater feeling of job security than do teachers. Commercial service operations such as ELCs are traditionally beset by unpredictability of demand (Lovelock and Patterson, 1998), which may mean teachers enjoying less permanent employment conditions than non-teaching staff. Many ESOL teachers, particularly those outside the tertiary sector, are likely to be on short-term contracts and even hourly rates, and may be hired and fired according to cyclical movements in the industry, as demonstrated by the finding that around two-thirds of ELC staff responding to the survey had been with their institutions a year or less.

This statistic is also of interest in terms of the overall findings of the survey, since the climate perceptions of the majority of respondents were formed on the basis of experience on the job of a year or less, and were slightly more negative than those of longer-serving staff. It may be that after an initial “honeymoon” period (up to six months), staff develop a more critical outlook on institutional climate (seven months to a year). However, as they remain with the organisation, they may become more committed to it, may identify more closely with organisational practices and indeed, may become involved in formulating them and overseeing their implementation. The findings reported here appear to support this general trend, but exactly how length of service impacts on climate perceptions is still not entirely clear. While it could lead to a shared perception of organisational climate (Glick, 1985; Schneider *et al.*, 1998), and could be a factor in the development of a “collective climate” (Rousseau, 1988), further research is required to obtain a clearer explanation of the forces at work here.

Although ELC size appears to have virtually no effect on staff perceptions of ELC service climate, ELC type does play a role to some degree. Tertiary ELC staff have a more positive perception of the service climate in their institutions than do staff in privately-owned ELCs, especially where client focus and staff service ethos are concerned. In particular, tertiary ELC staff have a stronger perception that clients receive the service they are led to expect from the ELC's publicity materials and are more likely to receive professional instruction, ethical treatment, and use satisfactory teaching resources. Staff commitment to service, feelings of personal responsibility for the service provided, and attention to detail are more evident in tertiary ELCs as far as tertiary staff are concerned, as are an understanding of their service role, the level of empowerment and the skills required for the job. Anecdotally, one might have expected respondents from private ELCs to be more marketing-oriented than those in tertiary ELCs, given an expected stronger commercial imperative among the former institutions. However, no significant difference was discerned on this issue. Taken together, these findings indicate that institutional type is a moderate determinant of ELC service climate. The tertiary-private differences may reflect what is anecdotally perceived to be a higher professional standard in the tertiary ELCs, which is likely to impact on issues such as ethics and teacher competence, but may also be a reflection of greater access to the resources, networks and power structures of the much larger organisations.

Conclusions

English language centres of the type examined in this study have something of a dual character. They are institutions that employ trained, qualified teachers, and are subject to some sort of official regulation in terms of the quality of the educational experience they provide their student clients. But they are also service organisations that operate

in a competitive environment, and are expected to generate a profit for their owners. This may explain why they have been largely overlooked in terms of research into administrative and management aspects of their operations: to educational researchers, they are private firms, but to management researchers they are educational institutions. The study described here attempted to address this dilemma by using a services model to examine ELC staff perceptions of the environments of their institutions as private education providers. The findings indicate that staff in the New Zealand English language centres studied had a strongly positive perception of the service climate in their institutions. Staff perceived aspects of service orientation and client focus in their institutions in a very positive light, and with some exceptions, appeared to have a healthy appreciation of the commercial realities of their work. However, they had a less positive perception of issues surrounding employment conditions, resourcing and manager performance. The implication is that ELCs are doing a good job as far as the “soft” areas of services management practice are concerned, such as service orientation, client focus, service milieu, and collegial support; but that they are falling short to some extent in the “hard” areas, such as the basic management tasks of planning, organisation, control and communication, as well as resource allocation.

There are a number of specific implications for English language centre managers and administrators. In order to develop a more positive service climate, they may need to address resourcing issues for staff, particularly in terms of facilities, equipment and teaching/learning materials; they need to reflect on practices such as the hiring of unqualified teachers, which may be perceived by staff as barriers to the provision of superior service. The constraints of the unpredictability of demand and the nature of ELC work notwithstanding, attention to ELC staff concerns in the areas of stress, remuneration, and job security is indicated. Client focus is important, as is a positive service milieu. But so too are traditional managerial tasks of planning, organisation, control and communication. Managers need to ensure, for instance, that the actual service provided meets the expectations clients have developed from the information provided in publicity materials and web sites; that staff have a clear understanding of management’s service strategy and of their own role as service providers in what is both a professional and commercial environment; and that effective structures are in place to serve the strategy, including monitoring and feedback mechanisms, in terms of both staff performance and client satisfaction with the service provided.

The nature and outcomes of the present study suggest a number of opportunities for future research in the area of ELC and ESOL management and administration. It would be of interest, for instance, to establish through replication, the extent to which the findings presented here are generalisable to other countries and contexts where ELCs operate. Furthermore, this research focused on the climate perceptions of non-managerial staff. Manager perceptions of organisational and service climate, along with a range of other issues that concern ELC managers, from strategy to staffing to quality control, would provide fertile ground for the ESOL management researcher.

A further potential area of research relates to the wider issue of the professional outlook versus the commercial outlook within education. Recent trends in public education, such as the move in New Zealand in the last two decades to greater school self-management, plus a growing public awareness of, and interest in business and

commerce, have put pressure on individual schools to adopt a more managerial approach to school administration. Schools are expected, for instance, to have a mission statement, to develop strategies, to set key objectives and to monitor outcomes, to develop and implement human resource policies, and to observe strict fiscal responsibility in terms of budgets. Issues arising from this application of commercial principles to a traditionally public, educational domain have increasingly found voice in the literature. However, far less attention has been paid to themes surrounding the operation of traditional professional educational mores within the burgeoning private educational sector.

While discord between the values of the professional educator on the one hand, and that of the business manager on the other, may be a common denominator between the private and public domains, some unique challenges arise when teachers are confronted with the realities of functioning in a purely commercial context. Students, for instance, become clients, who inhabit the classroom not because the law requires it, but because, irrespective of age or background, they can afford to pay for the service. These clients may have specific views on what they want to achieve within their educational experience and how they want to achieve it. Depending on prior expectations and current perceptions, they might not hesitate to express these views directly to service providers, nor might they be averse to making complaints to management, particularly if their preferred approach is at variance with that of the institution and its teachers. In a private educational world, furthermore, schools, colleges and other institutions become commercial organisations that depend for their survival on making profits. The equation is relatively simple: an absence of clients equals an absence of income equals business failure, which, for teachers, tutors, trainers and other staff, means redundancy. Managers may, at times, be forced to make business decisions that are incompatible with educational principles. Educators, in turn, may be faced with a choice of acquiescing in practices they consider educationally unsound and/or unethical, or of forgoing employment and income. The potential for ongoing tension between what is commercially expedient and what is educationally desirable is a theme complex that would bear further scrutiny by researchers interested in this area of educational administration.

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Appendix

Sample climate questionnaire items from Management Practices and Service Orientation dimensions. Researchers interested in the complete questionnaire should contact the author.

ELC service management practices

In this English language centre, management . . .

01. Ensures that staff are familiar with the service goals.
02. Ensures that staff are familiar with the service policies and procedures.
03. Ensures that staff know how to deliver superior service.
04. Regularly monitors service standards.
05. Leads by example in providing superior service to clients.

06. Demonstrates a sound grasp of the TESOL aspects of the service.
07. Routinely talks to staff about the importance of providing superior service.
08. Routinely consults with staff on ways to improve service delivery.
09. Provides staff with feedback on their performance.
10. Shares with staff feedback obtained from clients on service quality.
11. Keeps staff informed about issues affecting the organisation.
12. Encourages staff in their efforts to provide superior service.
13. Ensures staff have the material resources they need to provide superior service.
14. Makes an effort to remove obstacles to the delivery of superior service.
15. Fosters mutual co-operation and support among staff.
16. Supports professional development for staff.
17. Recognises the efforts of staff who provide superior service.

Service orientation

In this English language centre, staff ...

37. Are committed to providing superior service.
38. Feel personally responsible for the quality of service clients receive.
39. Are painstaking in their work, paying close attention to detail.
40. Display a friendly manner towards clients.
41. Adopt a helpful attitude towards clients.
42. Empathise with clients who are having problems in an unfamiliar environment.
43. Exhibit patience when clients have problems communicating with them.
44. Display professionalism in their dealings with clients.
45. Are willing to assist clients adjust to life in this country.
46. Are sensitive to the needs of clients from other cultures.
47. Are willing to help clients even outside normal working hours.
48. Make an effort to establish rapport with clients.
49. Go out of their way to help a client who has a problem.
50. Actively support clients in their efforts to achieve their English language goals.
51. Cater for individual needs of clients, when appropriate.
52. Are willing to counsel clients who come to them with personal concerns.
53. Take an active interest in clients' welfare.

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