

Peer Review Article

# A Deep Dive into Social Field Shifts:

## Examining Field Autonomy and Malleability During an Awareness-based Change Program

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### Abstract

Social fields have garnered increasing interest among practitioners and researchers, particularly due to the need to address multiple intersecting crises and their societal and organizational impacts. A recent conceptualization by Pomeroy and Herrmann (2023) proposes that social fields have a degree of autonomy that perpetuates phenomena like interaction patterns. The study adopts this lens to empirically examine the shifts at three schools during a longitudinal awareness-based change program. In-depth interviews with school professionals provide insights into the potential of relational awareness to “dive below the vortex” of autonomous and de-generative interaction cycles, facilitating a transition towards responsive and generative cycles. However, while field autonomy was transformed across the entire organization in some cases, persistent patterns were observed in others, indicating variations in the malleability of social fields. The implications of these findings for promoting organizational change are discussed.

## Keywords

social field, awareness-based systems change, organizational development, organizational culture, relational awareness, systems sensing

## Introduction

From all observable indicators, the period ahead will be challenging. The intersecting crises of our time—climate, ecological, equity, technological, geopolitical, and beyond—are pressure tests for existing structures, calling for wide-ranging systemic transformations from *micro* to *mundo*-levels. But as phrases such as “systems change” risk becoming buzzwords, it is imperative to understand the enabling conditions for genuine transformation. Systems change scholars and practitioners have argued that it is insufficient to exclusively focus on the outer, visible aspects of a system (Scharmer, 2016). Crucially, these aspects are entangled with the collective interior, the lived experience and relational quality within the system. More often than not, change efforts are bound to fail unless there is a shift in this interior dimension, referred to as the “social field” (Scharmer, 2016; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013; Boell & Senge, 2016). Practitioners involved in change work are familiar with the concept that the social field of each organization or team appears to have a “life of its own,” and the same intervention produces very different results in different settings. This phenomenon is captured by the notion of “field autonomy,” recently proposed as a fundamental property of social fields (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023). Thus, improving our conceptual and practical knowledge about the dynamics of shifting social fields is critical.

While social systems can be observed, social fields are lived and known to us by feeling their resonance in our being. Therefore, the notion of the social field is associated with the assumption that change processes are crucially enabled by a deepening quality of *awareness*—often conceptualized as “presencing” (Scharmer, 2016), “generative mindfulness” (Schuyler et al., 2022), or “systems awareness” (Senge et al., 2019). Given the centrality of these concepts within *awareness*-based systems change, there is a need to thoroughly investigate the precise role that awareness may play in bringing about field shifts.

To provide insights into these matters, this study zeroes in on empirical case examples from the education sector which, at large, illustrates the necessity of working with the social field. Put bluntly, Western education systems are failing to adequately prepare the next generation for the multiple challenges ahead. While the OECD (2019) emphasizes the need to develop transformation capabilities, schools are ill-equipped to address this task, lacking the capacity to shift from conventional curriculum-based to transformative learning. Like many other sectors, the difficulties with producing the desired outcomes exhibited by these organizations arguably originate, to a large degree, in their social fields. In order to examine social field shifts, the study analyzes the empirical case of the change processes at three schools during a capacity building program aiming at the cultivation of *relational awareness*.

Based on the idea that social fields possess a degree of autonomy, but are also malleable for change, the study aims at examining the social field shifts that occurred at these schools, and the role of *relational awareness* in these shifts.

Conceptually, the study draws from the recent work of Pomeroy and Herrmann (2023) which articulates the fundamental properties of social fields, elaborated upon in the following section. Thereafter, the concept of *relational awareness* will be introduced, along with a description of the capacity building program.

## The Properties of Social Fields

Pomeroy and Herrmann (2023) posit that social fields are composed of three dynamic and interrelated properties: intercorporeality, autonomy, and affordance.

Firstly, social fields are founded in the reciprocal intertwining and resonance between one's own body and the body of another. This intertwining, coined by French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty as *intercorporeality*, involves a dynamic and circular process of bodily expression and impression (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). One's own gestures and experiences reflect and intertwine with those of another person, forming the foundation for intersubjectivity and mutual understanding. Usually, intercorporeality goes unnoticed, like a fish in the water not noticing its wetness (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023). Nevertheless, its impact is felt as the atmosphere within a social group.

Intercorporeality gives rise to the *autonomy* of social fields. Autonomy refers to the phenomenon where the interaction process itself can “take the lead,” overriding individual intentions and leading to behaviors that individuals may not fully understand (de Jaegher & di Paolo, 2007). If intercorporeality is the substance of the field, the water we swim in, one can think of autonomy as patterns in the water like waves, vortices, and aggregate states. These autonomous interaction patterns were “foregrounded” in pioneering ways by early proponents of family therapy (Bowen, 1966). Their self-replicating nature can be illustrated by the phenomenon that often individuals can switch roles while perpetuating the same pattern (Tomm et al., 2014). For example, Person A may in one situation interact as “criticizer” of the other and Person B as “defender,” while they readily exchange roles in another situation. This demonstrates the autonomous nature of the field and its influence on behaviors, impacting the well-being of individuals, their relationships, and the larger systems they operate in.

Autonomy can indeed manifest both generative qualities conducive to the well-being and flourishing of everyone involved, and de-generative qualities furthering pathologizing (Tomm et al., 2014) and “absencing” (Scharmer, 2016) dynamics that lead to negative symptoms in the actors and their contexts. It has been emphasized that the generativity of a field depends on its capacity for “integration” (Siegel, 2020, inspired by Bowen, 1966), comprising the individuals'

ability to differentiate their own feelings and actions from those of others and maintain their own values and perspectives, while simultaneously establishing compassionate and attuned connections with others. Concepts such as group and organizational dynamics (Bion, 1952; Hopper, 2009) and organizational culture (Schein, 1996) have elaborated on the phenomenon of autonomy, highlighting that it exerts a strong and stable influence on organizational functioning. Importantly, autonomy may also reproduce foundational social issues such as power imbalances. In fact, the concept of social fields has been widely used within sociology to describe these power dynamics (Bourdieu, 1987/1990), which are an important facet of field autonomy.

However, field autonomy does not compel actors to engage in these patterns. Rather, it “invites” them, as suggested by Maturana and Varela (1980), leaving room for emancipatory action. These invitations are the third property of social fields, their *affordance*.

Affordance refers to the “action possibility” presented to an organism by its environment, such as the sitability of a chair, the edibility of an apple, or the openability of a door (Gibson, 1979; Fuchs, 2000, 2013, 2016). In line with Lewin’s (1943; 1951) concept of force vectors in a social field, affordance either encourages or discourages specific action and feeling tendencies. If the autonomy of a field is likened to the aggregate state of water and stable patterns like waves, then affordance is akin to the felt sense of being pulled by the current. Affordances involve responsivities within individuals, including bodily, affective, and cognitive tendencies. For example, a hostile atmosphere may evoke the bodily inclination to shrink and withdraw, heightened alertness, and the tendency to view others as dangerous. Depending on the actors’ positions of power, whether structurally, culturally, or personally sourced (Boonstra & Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 1998), the field appears to encourage different action strategies.

These properties—intercorporeality, autonomy, and affordance—are interrelated within a dynamic feedback loop. Social fields emerge as autonomous entities through intercorporeality, with their quality determined by affordance. By actively working with affordances, it becomes possible to shift the autonomous patterns and overall quality of social fields.

## Cultivating Relational Awareness

Experiencing social fields is a pervasive and vibrant undercurrent of our lives. This discernment and knowing can be developed into a refined skill, as emphasized by practitioners working deliberately with the field (Brabant & DiPerna, 2016). Congruently, Pomeroy and Herrmann (2023) state, “we can build our capacity to know the field with a degree of accuracy—that is, we can interpret our own sensing of the field in a way that is resonant with the social reality collectively experienced” (p. 17).

For example, imagine two school faculties: one where educators and the principal have an open conversation about their challenges with some students, listening attentively to one another as they share how they feel in the situation and encouraging each other to also take the students' perspective, and another where educators join in blaming the students for the misbehavior, concealing their difficulties from their colleagues and the principal. Each situation evokes a distinct resonance.

Along those lines, Nielsen and Petersen (2021) developed the concept of “relational awareness” which they define as,

an embodied and mediated awareness of the extended intercorporeal affectivity and resonance. It can be experienced as an immediate response and as an embodied reflection perceived as an impulse, affectivity, a mood, an emotion or a conscious reflective line of thought. (p. 147)

The definition highlights that a field is known by resonating with it and by becoming conscious of the experienced resonance. This is referred to as “responsivity” which is the object of relational awareness. Responsivities are evoked by the affordances of the field, its invitations, pushes, and pulls on individuals. Being aware of these often unconscious responsivities requires active practice and cultivation. Nielsen and Petersen (2021) describe it as an “embodied activity mediated by methods of behaviour, motives and social means of language and discourse” (p. 141) such as attending to one's own breathing, guiding attention, and using inner speech to calm oneself.

There is a counterintuitive dynamic involved in relational awareness which is that a considerable portion of the activity involves sensing ‘inside’ oneself rather than ‘outside,’ because the field permeates one's body where it manifests as responsivities. As Foulkes, an early social fields scholar, noted, “what we traditionally look upon as our innermost self, the intrapsychic as against the external world is thus not only shareable, but is in fact already shared” (Foulkes, 1975, p. 62).

The conceptualization of relational awareness was developed during an embedded and longitudinal research process, during which the researchers participated in a training for educators. This training was a precursor of the awareness-based program under examination in this study, called here, “Relational Awareness for School Professionals” (RASP). Helle Jensen, the Danish psychologist who initiated and lead both programs, describes the conditions and competencies required for social field awareness (interviewed in Boell & Senge, 2016):

The really deep training is to take care of oneself as well as of the community and social relations. This is a refined balance that needs to be practiced all the time. Everybody has to take responsibility for themselves at all times in every moment. From that position, it becomes clear how the energy is moving through the field—right here, right now. (p. 27)

This awareness is particularly necessary in schools. As Juul and Jensen (2002/2017) convincingly argue, those in positions of power within a social field hold greater responsibility for its quality. This principle is exacerbated in the education system which positions its most vulnerable members, children, at the receiving end of a chain of asymmetrical relationships and nested hierarchies. In fact, decades of research have underscored that providing children with attuned relationships is of paramount importance for their learning, development, and well-being (Cornelius-White, 2007; Martin & Dowson 2009; Murray & Pianta, 2007; Wubbels et al., 2016). Strangely enough, this body of knowledge has been largely ignored in the professional training of educators.

Therefore, RASP was launched as an awareness-based program aiming to provide school professionals with the necessary competences to cultivate more generative social fields in the whole school, and particularly in the classroom. Its approach will be presented in the methods section.

## Research Aims and Objectives

The goal of this study is to explore the social field shifts within three organizations participating in an awareness-based change program, with a particular focus on the fields' autonomy and their malleability as well as the role of awareness in bringing about field shifts.

## Methods

### Study Design

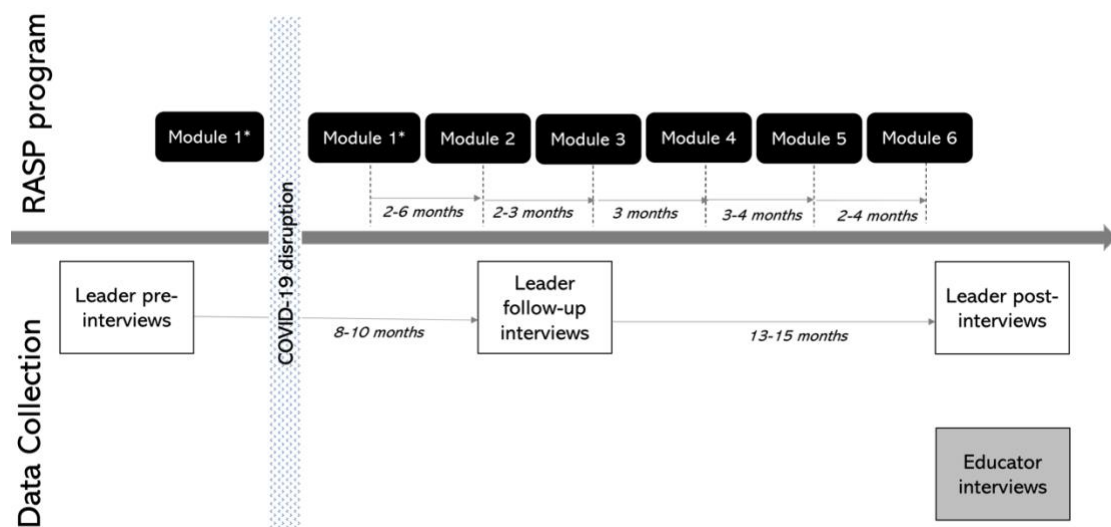


Figure 1. Study Design.

The study was part of a research project by the Institute for Medical Psychology at the University Hospital Heidelberg focusing on the RASP program. The project adopted a converging explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017) evaluating the program effects on students and educators using quantitative pre- and post-assessments (Control Group Pre-Post-Design) alongside the collection of qualitative data to explore the processes in-depth and over time. Using a qualitative approach, this study explored the lived experience of field shifts enacted by the educators and school leaders within the faculties' social fields, collecting longitudinal data from school leaders and post-hoc data from educators directly after the completion of their capacity building program. Note that the focus of this study is on the social field among school professionals, rather than on students. The field of school professionals is an aspect that has rarely been studied despite being a central factor for the well-being of both adults and children (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, Mahfouz et al., 2019).

The study and intervention required several adjustments due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These are comprehensively described elsewhere (Herrmann et al., 2021), along with the effect of the pandemic on the social fields of the three schools.

## **An Awareness-Based Whole School Approach**

The training was developed by Danish school psychologist Helle Jensen in collaboration with Jesper Juul and the Danish Society for the Promotion of Life Wisdom in children (Juul et al., 2012/2016; Juul & Jensen, 2002/2017; Jensen, 2014), based on the conviction that an emancipatory shift towards a responsibility-based culture at schools is due (Juul & Jensen, 2002/2017). To support the school professionals in shaping more generative fields, the training aimed at cultivating their relational awareness. This involved, firstly, an awareness of self, including the ability to feel responsivities evoked in an interaction, knowing one's own needs and boundaries and caring for them, and, secondly, an awareness of the other, i.e., the ability to take the students' perspective, for instance by understanding their attachment needs and responding to them, and, thirdly, an awareness of the process between self and other and the ability to shape this process in positive ways, e.g., by expressing oneself in a personal and authentic manner without devaluing others. To support these abilities, the so-called 'innate competences' were cultivated, involving contact with the heart, body, breath, creativity, and consciousness (Juul et al., 2012/2016). While bearing some similarities with mindfulness, the program framed these aspects not primarily as a goal in and of themselves but in service of the competence to shape more empathic relationships.

The capacity building was carried out in six three-day modules, focusing on the themes of well-being, relational competence (Juul & Jensen, 2002/2017), relating with children experienced as challenging or burdened, grief and loss, parental collaboration, and collegial reflection. The modules were attended by training groups of max. 23 participants, composed of teachers, other pedagogical

professions, and administrative staff from all three schools. Simultaneously, multiple training sessions (ca. 3 hour per session) were held with the school leaders (principals, co-principals, and after-school leaders). Notably, a significant portion of the time allocated for school leader training had to be used for organizational matters due to the pandemic. After completing the six modules, the educators participated in a supervision process to support implementation sustainability which, due to time constrictions, is not covered in the data collection of this study.

The methodology of the capacity-building was based on an experiential learning approach, using exercises to work with the specific challenges and examples from educators' work life. A wide array of tools and practices were used, including guided dialogue formats, contemplative dyads (Kok & Singer, 2017), role play with educators taking students' or parents' position, supervised collegial reflection, along with presentations about the core concepts. Moreover, meditations, group games, and physical exercises were introduced that educators could directly employ in the classroom. Importantly, the modules aimed at creating a generative social field, providing the participants with empathy and attunement without coercing them into any activity.

RASP was led by Helle Jensen and co-facilitated by a team of psychologists, family therapists, and supervisors (including the author of this study) who had completed at least three years of training in the method.

## Sample

The participating schools comprised three elementary schools situated in socioeconomically diverse urban districts in Germany and recruited by means of various communication channels. The district schools were similar in size with a sum total of ca. 1,200 students (ca. 400 per school) and ca. 130 faculty members (ca. 43 per school). The schools obtained a majority vote of the faculty in favor of participation in the project.

Interviews for this study were conducted with  $N = 14$  school professionals. They participated in the first of two RASP cohorts, taking place between March 2020 - November 2021 with a total of 88 faculty members from the three schools. The sampling was influenced by the consideration that reconstructing social fields shifts required rich and nuanced data from multiple viewpoints. Given schools' hierarchical and multiprofessional structure, sampling was based on the criterion of profession (Patton, 2014), collecting data at each school from school leaders, teachers, and other pedagogical professionals. Informants were recruited by e-mailing all members of the first RASP cohort. Interviews were conducted with the educators who responded and were willing to participate (convenience sampling).

Participation in the study was voluntary for all informants, was not counted as working time, nor rewarded with financial or similar incentives, and could be terminated at any time without personal or professional disadvantages. All



participants were informed in writing and verbally about the course and purpose of the study and data protection guidelines. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the Medical Faculty of Heidelberg University prior to the data collection.

## Data Collection

This study employed qualitative interviews suitable for investigating the lived experience within social fields. Interviews followed a semi-structured format (see Figure 1) with open questions inviting participants to freely express their perceptions and opinions about the social field. Educators were interviewed after completing their capacity building, and sequential interviews were conducted with school leaders, before, during, and after the first cohorts' training. In the first interview with the school leaders, they were asked to build a systems map of their school using diverse artifacts to facilitate more detailed reflections. Follow-up interviews involved member checking to ensure communicative validity. The first and third rounds of interviews were conducted in person, while the second round was conducted virtually. Detailed notes were taken after each interview, and interviews were recorded and transcribed, including observations of loudness of voice and gestures when these factors seemed relevant to capture participants' embodied knowing.

## Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), a well-established approach within qualitative research coherent with the study's interpretivist and phenomenological paradigm. The analysis followed a process that has been outlined in six steps, even though it is in fact iterative rather than strictly linear (Braun & Clarke, 2006), starting with data familiarization, reviewing transcripts for errors, recalling the interview situations, and taking preliminary notes. Subsequently, data was systematically coded using the MAXQDA software, encompassing both semantic and latent coding based on the research aims. Initial themes were generated from the coded and collated data, considering salient and meaningful aspects of the text. Themes and sub-themes were generated by triangulating between the situated reflections by the educators and school leaders from the same school about their school's social field (Patton, 2014), identifying the contrasts and points of convergence among these perspectives. In particular, shifts in the field over time were constructed by comparing data from the offset of RASP (pre-interviews with school leaders) with data collected after the educators' RASP training (post-interviews with school leaders and educators). The patterns of interactions indicated by several informants from one school were closely analyzed. Illustrations of these patterns were created, inspired by Tomm et al. (2014). These initial themes were then reviewed in collaboration with the co-supervisor,

aiming for distinctiveness and a reduction of overlap. They were further refined, defined, and named. Finally, the results section was written.

## Limitations

The phenomena of interest in this study, shifts in the social fields among the professionals, pertain to the social field of a particular school. Hence, we present examples that characterize processes in each of the three case schools, acknowledging the situatedness of the data. However, the following themes should not be interpreted as representations or exhaustive portrayals of the respective schools' social fields, given the small sample size and the multi-layered nature of social fields. Rather, the reconstructed social field shifts are based on a deliberate focus on the tensions and points of convergence between the school leaders' and educators' perspectives. Additional and different field shifts may very well have been constructed by expanding the sample size. For example, by identifying and interviewing educators with stronger criticisms of the RASP training. It must also be acknowledged that the findings from this sample of motivated educators willing to be interviewed cannot be readily generalized to the whole population of RASP participants.

Therefore, the themes can only describe a limited set of aspects within a much more complex development. For instance, some of the interaction patterns illustrated in the examples might also be found in other schools, albeit to different degrees and "phenotypes." The following results must be read with these caveats in mind.

## Findings

There are several examples of the quality of each school's social field in the process of being changed, and also examples of how difficult this development can be. Some of the de-generative autonomous patterns were portrayed as malleable, serving as starting points for the development of the faculty climate. Others appeared as transient indicators of the change process itself, while still others were found to be persistent and particularly challenging to address. Overall, the examples below demonstrate that the persistence and malleability of autonomy varies from field to field.

## Shifts and Stabilities in Social Field Autonomy

In the sections that follow, major themes are exemplified under three subthemes, each originating in one of the three schools (here named school 1, 2, and 3), and formulated with a quote from a school leader:

- "It costs a lot of sweat to find togetherness"
- "We are well on our way on this change process"
- "Constantly under attack"

## Malleable Autonomy: “It cost us a lot of sweat to find togetherness”

### *Pre-training: Contagious Negative Affect and Cynicism*

The first example concerns a faculty’s social field characterized by contagious negative affect that turned out to be malleable over the course of 1.5 years. The principal and the co-principal of school 2 articulated their impression that prior to the training, faculty members were engaged, motivated, and supported each other. However, the atmosphere was also portrayed as unstable, at times giving rise to strong negative affectivity and polarizing cynicism. The school leaders describe how they had over several years worked on the social field, shifting it from initial mistrust (e.g. “no one believes me”, “cloud of distrust”) into a more trusting atmosphere. Before the school started RASP, the school leaders stated that they were shocked that some faculty members began to again demonstrate harsh negativity and cynicism: “We were completely shocked as we noticed ... that old behaviors break free of which we had thought. ... It cost us a lot of sweat to find a certain culture and togetherness” (Toni, principal, school 1).

The negative affectivity of a few educators was described as propagating, leading to negative affect and polarization throughout the entire social field. Moreover, it was seen as an obstacle to collaboration because many educators were scared of the “strong” and “loud” criticism. The school leaders also felt attacked themselves. Claire, co-principal at school 1, articulated that “every sentence implies pointing the finger.” Hence, the display of strong negativity invited a tense and charged bodily and affective responsivity of fear or aggression in the interactors. This tense responsivity shaped their (spontaneous) reactions which thereby further propagated the negativity. The social field’s autonomy propagated phenomena like negative affectivity and cynicism by coupling the expression of negativity with *catching* it in a mutually reinforcing pattern. It is worth mentioning that the pattern was described to propagate further, affecting the social fields in the classroom and increasing educators’ irritability towards children. As Toni elucidated, “this mood ... gets transferred, and this stance towards children ... hence, one also doesn’t agree with the students. ... [saying] “They are now also doing all this to annoy me.”” Importantly, the school leaders regarded this pattern as transient rather than as an enduring and predominant feature of the social field.

### *Shift from Affect Contagion to Embodied Presence*

After 1.5 years (post-training), the school leaders highlighted that the educators who earlier had demonstrated strong negativity continued doing so, and they had not participated in the RASP program’s first cohort. However, the impact of their negativity on the whole field was mitigated. While before RASP, the negativity reportedly propagated throughout the faculty, after the training the school

leaders described it as “curbed.” Moreover, the school leaders stated that educators demonstrating the negativity in their behavior “somehow get carried along and held” by their colleagues (Claire, co-principal, school 1). Hence, the autonomous pattern of affect contagion turned out to be malleable—a shift attributed by the interviewees to RASP.



Figure 2. “Condensing” Field Shift: From Affect Contagion Loop to Embodied Presence Loop.

As indicated by reflections from school leaders and educators, changing the field’s autonomy was crucially enabled by the increased relational awareness of the affordances that reinforced the autonomous pattern, and the ability to shape a different response. The changed attitude of these educators was described as more balanced. Claire, the co-principal of school 1, stated, “they are grounded,” do not react “immediately to everything,” but first let things “sink in.” Accordingly, two of the educators spoke of disentangling from other’s negativity, along with a greater sense of centeredness and capacity for self-regulation:

When I look after myself, then the quality of the relationship changes. And that does not only concern the children here at school, it concerns my colleagues, too ... . When I take a breath [breathes out], things are never as bad as they seem. (Franziska, educator, school 1)

Here, the educator employed a German saying (literally: “You don’t eat things as hot as you cook them”), expressing equanimity in the face of others’ excessively negative outlook.

The same learning process was reported by the school leaders. Facing others’ negativity, they consciously grounded themselves. As Toni stated,

It did not cause me to react in such a confused and so-to-say spontaneous way. Instead, I could calm down, recollect what was significant for me and report that back. I was not affected by it. (Toni, principal, school 1)

The use of breathing was highlighted as a means to self-regulate the bodily responsiveness evoked by the field affordance:

I had somehow a couple of seconds for myself. I can only describe it with ... ‘Vmmmm’ [interviewee breathes out slowly and makes a downward movement with the hand in front of the body] ... Getting a posture, and standing facing the person. (Toni, principal, school 1)

The bodily gesture serves as a reminder that the field is founded in intercorporeality. Since autonomous patterns are based on interbodily resonance, shifting the field has an embodied quality to it. Relational awareness of the felt bodily resonance enhances the degrees of freedom of shaping the field. This is a key mechanism for shifting social fields. Toni described its effect as the capacity to speak calmly with the educator and set boundaries “without bursting out against her ... Before [RASP], I had not been able to do this” (Toni, principal, school 1).

Summing up, the dynamic in this faculty seems to illustrate a malleable field autonomy. The pattern could be effectively changed by responding to its affordance in a more grounded way. While the field previously propagated negativity, the educators’ increased relational awareness co-shaped a more conscious and centered quality in the social field that was able to “hold” the negativity. Notably, the school leaders provided an example where they were able to enact such a shift in an interaction with an educator. The malleability may be facilitated by their ‘role-modeling’ as powerful actors within the field.

For each field shift reconstructed in this study, a metaphor will be presented alluding to its resonance morphology. These analogies are to be taken as a hint that fields are known by resonating, requiring a ‘sensing’ awareness. In this case, the shift’s morphology can be compared to water condensing from steam to liquid. By becoming aware of the felt responsivity and breathing into the tense and hot thundercloud of affect contagion, it cooled down and condensed like rain drops.

### ***Shift from Cynicism to Compassion***

The educators described an additional shift in the social field from cynicism towards compassion, exemplifying once again the malleability of certain autonomous patterns. In essence, the changes affected how vulnerability was dealt with. Rolf, educator at school 1, spoke of “a grim sense of humor” that had marked the social field prior to RASP, creating distance from emotional aspects of school life and inviting actors to collectively harden themselves against their own and each other’s vulnerabilities. For instance, Rolf described a widespread tendency to make “rough” remarks, expecting from colleagues to “brush it off like nothing”. It was emphasized by all interviewees that the field shifted towards greater connectedness and “trust” due to RASP. Rolf mentioned that “the tone among us” changed, in the sense that “one listens more carefully and also watches the nonverbal language.” The act of listening empathically to colleagues during the training and thereby experiencing their vulnerability may have been instrumental. Rolf stated that “what is certain is that every colleague probably has something like that [vulnerability], and it sits within everyone. Hence, one approaches certain things with more sensitivity” (Rolf, educator, school 1).

A new, virtuous loop in the field seemed to have been established, coupling the display of vulnerability with compassion, encouraging educators to soften,

allowing themselves and others to appear more personally, including vulnerable sides. To provide another metaphor, the shift's morphology may be compared to a melting of cynicism into a connected and fluid quality.

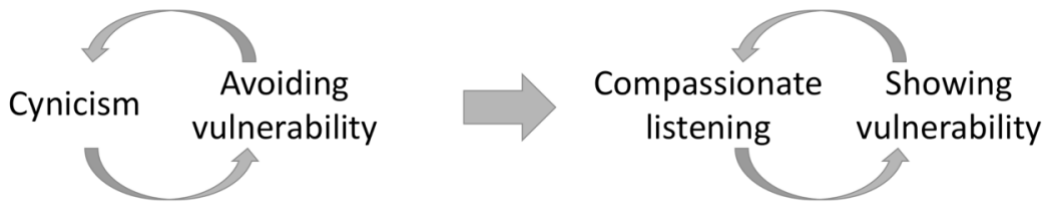


Figure 3. “Melting” Field Shift: From Cynicism Loop to Compassion Loop.

The school leaders highlighted that the shift was tangible, yet difficult to describe. Claire, the co-principal of school 1 stated, “you feel it. It is like a bond.” Further, she articulated, “these are vibrations and hard to put into words.” Interestingly, when inquiring further into its phenomenology, Toni, the school leader, spoke of field-like properties (“nonverbal wave, a nonverbal web, a knowing bond”, [Claire, co-principal, school 1]) supporting their work. Toni stated, “it’s like a dovetailed network which, in its wave-like form, possibly made us here more flexible. So that we could respond very differently to certain situations” (Toni, principal, school 1).

It is worth mentioning that neither RASP nor the interview process explicitly introduced the concept of a social field. Hence, the finding suggests that field awareness may indeed be a natural capacity (Brabant & DiPerna, 2016).

### Unfreezing Autonomy: “We are well on our way in this change process, not yet in the middle of it. Maybe in the first third of it”

#### ***Pre-training: Appreciative Atmosphere, but Under-Differentiated***

The second example concerns a pattern within a school’s social field with a positive atmosphere and collective efficacy, along with the tendency to avoid conflict. As Mika, the principal of school 2 stated, “There are many that think together, ... and manage things together.” Similarly, the interviewed educators portrayed the faculty as “very, very friendly among each other and very helpful” (Linda, educator, school 2) and as “a pleasant faculty which together masters many challenges” (Jaden, educator, school 2).

However, the school leaders also mentioned challenges. Mika spoke of the difficulty of “clearly articulating expectations” with “a clarity that one is the leader” and initiating difficult conversations. This pattern can be illustrated with a phrase that Mika referenced as the school leaders’ “favorite” one at school: “Here we don’t talk like this ... . Not with parents, not with children, not with one another.” On one hand, the phrase asserts the obligation to communicate in an appreciative manner, which was a core value for these school leaders.

However, on the other hand, it may also discourage open discussion of conflicting views and difficult truths.

Accordingly, Jean, the co-principal of school 2, expressed suspicion that things may appear “rosy when, in fact, they are not rosy ... Possibly, it is not the way one thinks.” The field autonomy seemed to emphasize appreciation and invite conflict avoidance. Using Siegel’s (2020) concept of ‘integration,’ the social field autonomy overemphasized linkage among the members of the field at the cost of their differentiation from each other, thus causing homogenization of expression and a reduced capacity to deal constructively with their differences.

### ***Pattern “Shaken up,” Entering Intense Liminality***

The developments in the faculty during RASP interfered with the social field’s pattern of creating cohesion, pushing it into a liminal zone. Jean, the co-principal of school 2, stated, “I believe that [RASP] has shaken things up” and “redefined the word relationship in school. But the ... new definition has not yet been written down for me up until now.” This quote suggests that changing persistent autonomous patterns can be a lengthy process. Specifically, nurturing the integration of a social field is easier said than done, as it requires acknowledging conflicting views and learning to foster a sense of belonging without sacrificing individual differences.

Throughout the interviews, the professionals from this school continued to emphasize the positive atmosphere among the faculty. However, the perception of homogeneity was questioned and de-constructed, leading into a challenging state of liminality. For instance, the school leaders spoke of difficult confrontations with their faculty. Mika stated, “I was standing there and thought: Is this still our faculty? ... Where are our people, our nice people?” Describing these confrontations, Jean tweaked their “favorite phrase” in a way that might indicate the trajectory of the change process: “This is simply not how we talk to each other. And also not to me, right? ... I don’t think it’s nice, when one talks to me like that.” In line with this shift from ‘we’ to ‘I’, one educator described that the faculty members’ differences from each other were exposed because of RASP:

Because all had thought: ‘We are all SO similar.’ And we are not. And this has been revealed now ... In fact, all had thought ... MANY—of course not everyone—that it is a big homogenous mass ... This is noticeable in faculty conferences. Everyone is convinced of their ability to speak for everyone else. They do not speak about themselves. They always speak for ALL others at the same time. And everyone else is nodding, too. And now it has become clear: ‘No ... we do not think all the same, right?’ And I see this is as big advantage but at the moment it feels like a disappointment ... like a detected fraud. (Jaden, educator, school 2)

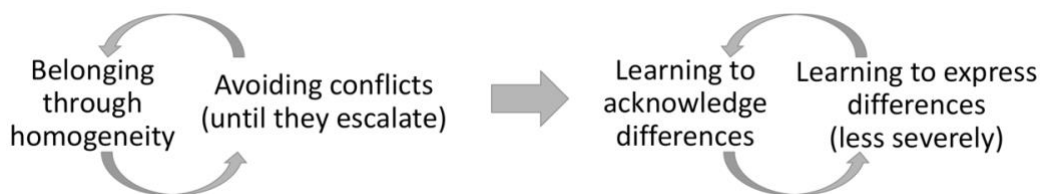
The passage highlights how the social field had strongly favored homogeneity, indicating the persistence of this pattern. Additionally, it underscores that when a deeply ingrained pattern undergoes a shift, it can evoke emotional reactions, such as disappointment. This is not an easy process. Given that the field's autonomy shapes the affective resonance among its members, it somewhat channels and binds their emotions, as well as their need for a sense of belonging or individuality. Consequently, changing a pattern can release the emotional charge previously held within it.

### ***Shift from Homogeneity to Integration***

For example, the school leaders spoke of a supervision during RASP that, in providing such a 'holding space' for a portion of the faculty, facilitated the social field's integration:

One goes in[to the supervision] with aggression, with grudge, ...  
And you leave and it is different. It flows into a positive thought,  
that I want to work again with these people. FEEL like  
collaborating with them again. (Mika, principal, school 2)

Delving further into the effects, Mika asserted that the social field between the conflict parties once again felt "solid." Mika stated, "I did not worry, Oh, what will happen now again? But I really felt that this is solid." This sense of solidity was associated with the field's integration, specifically, the perception that the conflict parties had improved their ability to acknowledge and address differences and challenges early on, preventing them from escalating into severe conflict. Mika described this as the capacity to "name ... when something is off, so that we don't even reach that [claps both hands]." This would indicate that a persistent autonomous pattern in a social field can still be modified for a portion of the field, provided there is an appropriate 'holding space' such as a supervision setting.



*Figure 4. "Solidifying/Sharpening" Field Shift: From Homogenizing Loop to Integrating Loop.*

The morphology of this shift can be likened to the solidification of the "rosy" homogenous cloud into a sharper recognition of differences. In this process, the social field matures, fostering greater integration and the capacity to hold conflicting viewpoints in a constructive way.



## Persistent Autonomy: “Constantly under attack”

### *Pre-training: Blaming and Defending*

The example from the third school was formulated to address a pattern of blaming and defending which, despite the introduction of RASP, was perceived to persist over time. In the pre-interview, Sasha, the principal of school 3, stated,

This is also occasionally reported to me by a few colleagues who may supposedly be a bit lower in the employee hierarchy, that the relationship between teachers, educators and social workers is often shaped by begrudging each other ... between groups. Spiteful talking about each other, alleging the others were not working enough, respectively. With me, everyone is actually always friendly. But that may be because of the role of the school principal. (Sasha, principal, school 3)

The quote suggests that the pattern of blaming was deeply entrenched in the social field. Moreover, it implies that the position in the hierarchy shaped the perception and quality of the field. Importantly, blaming was not the only option in this field, a “fair and appreciative” atmosphere was also mentioned. However, the persistence and intensity of the blaming were evident in how widely it had spread within and beyond the faculty. Moreover, the pattern propagated over time. While in the pre-interview quote presented above, others’ friendliness towards the principal was mentioned, in the follow-up interview, Sasha stated, “in my role one is constantly under attack.”

Both school leaders and faculty members spoke independently of the risk of becoming targets of accusations. This affordance invited the interviewees to adopt a defensive stance as they sought to protect themselves from anticipated attacks. Thus, the pattern impaired collaboration among the actors, giving rise to additional reasons for blame.

### *Pattern Persists, Despite Attempts to Promote Change*

Blaming and defending persisted despite the implementation of RASP. 1.5 years into the training, the school leader explicitly confirmed that the respective statements made in the pre-interview at the offset of the program were still valid, indicating a lack of perceived change. Sasha, the principal of school 3, stated, “I find it very tough how some people treat each other.”

Congruently, Marianne, an interviewed educator also reported that the field affordance still invited a defensive stance, asking, “Do I have to justify myself?”

Three processes were described through which the field’s autonomy may have resisted change. Firstly, the pattern assimilated attempts to promote empathy. Specifically, the perceived low level of RASP commitment became new material for mutual blame, reinforcing the existing pattern. For example, the

actors discussed others displaying avoidant behavior or having “pulled out of RASP, which contributed to the ongoing blame dynamics. Secondly, when the field at times escalated into a state of emergency, its capacity for learning was impaired. Jill, an educator at school 3, stated, “during the last [RASP] module, there were again many irritations concerning the whole school ... Actually, I want to engage in RASP and now my brain is busy with completely different things, it is occupied.”

A third process preventing change may be a perceived mismatch between the program and the culture and values enacted by the school leaders and the faculty in the field. In the pre-interview, the school leaders expressed a lack of clarity about the program goals, which may have impaired the field’s malleability. Sasha, for example, used the phrase of having “bought the pig in the poke.” By contrast, the school leaders from the other two schools highlighted their alignment with the program, providing numerous examples of specific measures implemented already before RASP to support trust and appreciative communication at their school. However, these differences may be about more than individual school leader behavior, and factors such as the school’s systemic context may also have been more or less favorable for the intervention.

In conclusion, this example highlights the social field’s ability to perpetuate de-generative patterns.

### ***Shift from Defending to Listening***

The persistence of this pattern can be likened to a frozen field, compelling the actors to harden and react in defensive ways. However, there were instances presented where it was possible to temporarily set aside these defensive reactions and respond to blame with active listening rather than immediate justification.

For example, Sasha, the principal of school 3, spoke about learning to respond differently to educators’ dissatisfaction: “it’s not about explaining and justifying everything ... but giving the other a chance to express and give a voice to his unwillingness, his disappointment, his sadness or ... the alleged injustice” (Sasha, principal, school 3).



*Figure 5. “Evaporating” Field Shift: From Defending Loop to Listening Loop.*

Here, the school leader described being aware of the impulses to justify oneself and suspending these reactions by focusing on body sensations and

breath. It is worth noting that the shift may not have resulted in a noticeable change in the frozen morphology of the pattern at this point, but it holds the potential to eventually ‘evaporate’ some layers of the frozenness. This example underscores the possibility of altering even highly persistent autonomous patterns, at least temporarily.

## Implications for Conceptualizing and Navigating Social Field Shifts

### The Fields’ Autonomy Varies in Persistence

The findings from the three schools over 1.5 years suggest that field autonomy exhibits varying levels of persistence and intensity. This variation is illustrated in the figure as two movements, represented by arrows, that delineate the degrees of malleability and persistence.

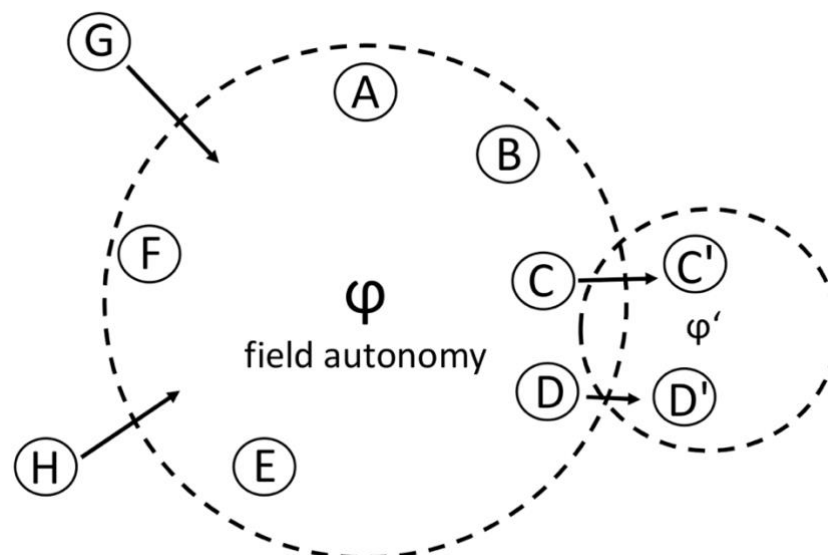


Figure 6. Field autonomy propagates by drawing actors in, shifts by creating new attractor field.

The first movement illustrates how actors are drawn into the field autonomy, as depicted by actors H and G being pulled into the field. This means that they start to reproduce in their interactions the same patterns seen within the field autonomy (indicated by the Greek letter  $\phi$ ). For instance, in two schools, patterns like blaming/defending and affect contagion were observed on various systems levels, such as interactions between students and teachers, among colleagues, with parents, and between faculty and school leaders. The extent to which a particular quality or pattern of interaction has propagated among the actors in a system indicates the strength of field autonomy.

The other movement depicted in the figure represents the ‘metamorphosis’ of field autonomy into a new version ( $\phi'$ ), a field shift proper. This movement is

indicated by actors C and D crossing the threshold from re-enacting pattern  $\phi$  towards enacting a new pattern  $\phi'$ . The new pattern ( $\phi'$ ) can function as a new 'attractor' for the other actors in the field, infusing the field with different resonance qualities such as compassion, embodied presence, and a capacity to hold differences, 'pulling' towards new types of interpersonal interactions. Importantly, the emerging autonomous pattern may initially not possess the same strength throughout the entire field; hence, its Venn circle has a smaller diameter. In the findings, variations in the strength of the new pattern were evident. While the example of compassion for vulnerability was a rather strong and stable pattern, the responding to critique with listening was more of a fleeting phenomenon.

In the figure, there is a transition zone between two patterns  $\phi$  and  $\phi'$ , as indicated by the overlapping Venn diagrams. Within this liminal space, the old and habitual ways of interacting have been "shaken up," but the new patterns have not yet fully formed and are, in essence, unpredictable. Every shift reported in this study was lived in this liminal, unpredictable way. Given the complex autonomy of the field, any intervention impulse will be molded and changed, defying simplistic linear approaches. Only in hindsight, the emerging pattern was known. Field shifts can release an affective charge that was previously bound up in the old pattern and now needs to be addressed. If this transitional phase is prolonged, as in the example of school 2, the field can build intensity that can be disorienting for the actors involved.

Both movements are influenced by the actors' power within the field. For example, enacting a new response to the negativity displayed by one of the educators, the school leader set the tone for the entire field enhancing its malleability. By contrast, at a school where the school leader was less informed about the intervention, the field in general appeared to be less malleable. In short, field autonomy is more readily influenced by those who hold power to draw actors in. This has been well documented, for example, in the literature on the role of leadership in changing culture and climate (Boell & Senge, 2016; Schein, 1996; Mahfouz et al., 2019).

The malleability can be compared to the different aggregate states, such as being liquid, gaseous, or solid, with shifts occurring from one state to another. Examples springing from the data include 'condensing' affect contagion into embodied presence, 'evaporating' defensiveness into active listening, 'melting' cynicism into compassion, and 'solidifying' the field by addressing conflictive issues.

The findings suggest that the shifts were crucially facilitated by relational awareness, which will be explored in more detail subsequently.

## Diving Below the Vortex: Relational Awareness Decouples Affordance and Autonomy

The findings provide insights into the role of relational awareness in social field shifts, suggesting that it has the capacity to ‘decouple’ affordance and autonomy. Given that a field’s autonomous and self-reproducing patterns are sustained by its affordance (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023), this decoupling process paves the way for the emergence of new patterns. This process is particularly important for shifting pathologizing patterns that usually appear to be marked by reduced resonance with and awareness of self or other. In essence, all the examples of field shifts in this study were based on this process, which can therefore be likened to a generic “field shift archetype” (Gonçalves & Hayashi, 2021), akin to the concept of systems archetypes (Senge, 1990). This archetype is illustrated in Figure 7 below.

For instance, consider the shift from affect contagion to embodied presence. In this scenario, the affordance of others’ intense display of negative emotionality evoked equally emotional reactions such as out-bursts among educators, leading to self-reproducing propagation of negative affect and polarization within the field. As shown by the reactive loop in the figure, the actors’ reactivity was high, while their attunement and presence were low. However, with relational awareness, the actors allowed the affordance to “sink in,” becoming more attuned to intra- and inter-bodily resonances. This process opened up a new realm of possibilities for enacting a responsive loop.

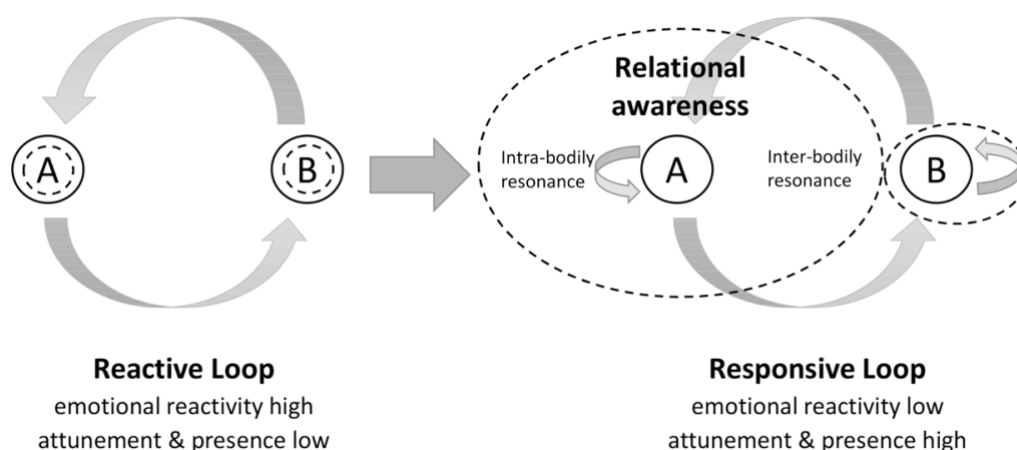


Figure 7. Field Shift Archetype: From Reactive Loop to Responsive Loop.

The role of relational awareness in shifting the field can again be likened to the dynamics of water. In a river, when two converging currents create a whirlpool, it can draw in objects like kayaks or people and pull them beneath the water's surface. The instinctive survival reaction might be to attempt to push back up to the surface to gasp for air. However, this can be dangerous and quickly lead to exhaustion. Interestingly, the way to escape a whirlpool is by diving down to its bottom, where the vortex loses its power. Allowing oneself to

sink opens up new possibilities for navigation and action. Likewise, in the context of a social field, when individuals experience the pull of the field and sense the bodily responsivities it evokes, relational awareness enables them to dive below the field's vortex. Instead of immediately reacting to the felt responsivities, relational awareness provides access to new levels of freedom and a broader array of response options. Consequently, actors can respond in ways that improve the quality of the field and invite others to engage in more constructive interactions. Moreover, fields appear to possess a core self-corrective tendency towards wholeness that can be activated by bringing awareness to their affordance, thus increasing their generativity. This highlights the role of relational awareness in promoting field shifts with an inherently emancipatory and integrative trajectory.

## Implications for Organizational Change

The findings of this study hold implications that can be highly relevant for practitioners working with social fields. There is a prevailing sense that social fields offer significant leverage for driving organizational change, often referred to as “shifting the field.” While this article acknowledges the excitement around this notion, it also highlights the inherent challenges in achieving such shifts, contributing to our understanding of what it takes to promote sustainable changes.

Considerations for practitioners working with social fields:

**Mind the Field's Malleability:** Longitudinal findings emphasize the importance of detecting the variations in an organization's field autonomy when aiming to facilitate social field shifts. Some patterns may be more readily shifted, while others persist. Assessing the spread of a pattern across the system can serve as an indicator of malleability. It is essential to shift gears if the autonomous pattern assimilates interventions in counterproductive ways, for example, turning it into material for blame. Assessing the persistence enables adaptations in process design. For instance, the RASP was a capacity-building program. However, the persistent de-generative patterns at the faculty level would have called for an intensified organizational change process, addressing these conflicts directly.

**Activate Relational Awareness:** Relational awareness promotes the individual and collective embodied capacity to shift from de-generative to generative fields. Activating and cultivating relational awareness is recommended as an integral part of sustainably improving an organization's social fields. Providing holding spaces where professionals can become aware of their bodily responsivities, including difficult ones, and are met with interest, attunement, and compassion is vital. These spaces may

involve group practices, dialogue fostering mutual attunement among colleagues, and practices supporting self-compassion and mindfulness. However, promoting relational awareness alone may not transform deeply entrenched patterns in a field, leading to the next implication.

### **Create Pockets That Serve as Alternative Attractor Fields:**

When an organization's social field persistently reproduces de-generative patterns, smaller 'pockets' within the field may still be malleable and provide leverage. These pockets can be spaces where sufficient holding and awareness are promoted, allowing the actors to sense the field's affordance, rather than being captured by it. Examples of such pockets from this study include training modules, supervision processes, and the training with school leaders. Particularly in hierarchical organizations like schools, working with the school leaders on their relational awareness can be a starting point that sets an example and prepares the field (Boell & Senge, 2016). Thereby, an alternative attractor field can be created that promotes and sustains desired qualities and eventually attracts more actors.

**Navigate the Liminal Zone beyond 'We' and 'Me':** The examples from this study remind us that organizations' social fields are arenas where not only power relationships but also fundamental human needs such as value, belonging, and autonomy, are being negotiated and routinized. Thus, the actors participate in the autonomous field patterns with their bodies, hearts, and minds, and when a pattern dissipates, it can release the affective energies previously bound up in it. It is important for facilitators to navigate this liminal zone with an understanding for both power dynamics and underlying needs and tensions. For example, supporting processes that surface and hold the individual differences in an organization, and creating compassionate linkages between them (Siegel, 2020; Guenther, 2022; Bockler, 2022), can facilitate the field's maturation towards greater flexibility, integration and thriving, marrying power with care.

## **Conclusion**

To investigate the dynamics of change in organizations, this study took a social fields perspective recently proposed by Pomeroy and Herrmann (2023) on the organizational fields of three schools participating in a longitudinal program cultivating relational awareness. The findings demonstrate that relational awareness *dives below the vortex* of a field's autonomous and de-generative loops and enables shifts towards responsive and generative loops. However, while in some cases, de-generative autonomous patterns were transformed throughout

the organization's social field, in others they persisted, suggesting that social fields vary in their malleability. It is my hope in writing this article that it contributes to the collective awareness of social fields, so that their power can be fully harnessed to support transformative systems change.

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