Upward Supportive Communication for School Principals

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Abstract: Upward supportive communication, which occurs when staff members offer or express support to their principals, is a phenomenon that has not been given much attention in terms of empirical research. It has been well established that downward supportive communication, typified by principals and other school leaders giving support to staff members, is important to teacher morale and school climate. However, principals need support in order to maintain their own morale and sense of connection with their schools. This article presents the results of recent research into upward supportive communication in government, Catholic systemic and independent schools. The study found consistently lower levels of upward supportive communication compared to other forms (downward and horizontal supportive communication). However, interview data suggest a number of ways in which teachers and other staff members can provide support to the principal.

Introduction

Supportive communication refers to interactions between people that serve functions relating to affirmation, encouragement, boosting morale and other forms of emotional and social support. Individuals might also engage in it to fulfill needs for recognition and social interaction. Examples of supportive communication might include: giving praise for a job well done, encouraging someone to keep trying, showing concern for welfare, showing empathy to a colleague, and offering 'moral support'.

Research conducted in Australian schools has identified three types of supportive communication relating to the direction of flow of the interactions (De Nobile, 2007). Horizontal supportive communication refers to support giving among staff members who are at the same level in terms of hierarchy, limited though formal hierarchies are in schools. This might occur through teachers offering support to one another, or members of the executive team encouraging their team members. Downward supportive communication refers to support given from those higher up in the hierarchy to individuals at lower levels. This is typified by a principal praising a staff member for a good effort or a stage supervisor encouraging teachers to continue good work. Upward supportive communication refers to occasions when support actually moves up the hierarchy. For example, staff members might offer moral support to the principal.

The importance of supportive communication has been well documented in research relating to morale and organisational climate. Downward supportive communication, for example, has been found to be strongly related to increased job satisfaction, job commitment and reduced

turnover intention of school staff (Brown & Wynn, 2009; De Nobile & McCormick, 2008). Downward support and horizontal support have been identified as mediators of teacher occupational stress and morale (Margolis & Nagel, 2006; Shen, 2009). Interestingly, far less is known about the potentials of upward support.

Support for the Principal

There is no doubt that principals need support in order to operate confidently and maintain adequate levels of morale. School leaders experience the same emotions and attitudes to work as other staff members, including those known to influence morale such as job satisfaction, occupational stress and job commitment (Chaplain, 2001; Wong & Cheuk, 2005). Support from the system or immediate superiors has been found to mediate the effects of some of these (Wong & Cheuk, 2005).

Indeed, the literature suggests that much of the support principals, as a specific group, get is expected to come from 'above' in the form of professional support from the larger system, state department or association (Good & McCaslin, 2004; Peters, 2008; Tornsen, 2010). Professional support can come in the form of mentoring and coaching programs (Aguilar, Goldwasser & Tank-Crestetto, 2011; O'Mahony & Matthews, 2006), training sessions (Dempster, Alen & Gatehouse, 2009; Mosrie, 1990), and collegial support networks (Hite, Williams & Baugh, 2005; Krovetz, 1995).

While this type of support is needed by principals at all stages of their career, there is evidence in recent research to suggest it is not consistent or reliable (Good & McCaslin, 2004; Peters, 2008). Further, because the 'system' or other governing body is an entity often located away from the physical site of the school it is not always possible for principals to receive emotional or social support when they need it. Potentially, this could come from the communication network within the school, especially from teachers in the form of upward supportive communication.

Upward Supportive Communication: A conundrum

Upward supportive communication is something that is known to happen but difficult to find evidence for. There is also a dearth of research literature on it. In preparing for this article a search based on the terms 'principal' and 'support' on the ERIC database identified 82 peer-reviewed journal articles on related topics. Of these, only two addressed the topic of upward support giving in any way. Perhaps not surprisingly, upward support was not the main focus of either of the two articles, but one factor among many issues to do with the perceived support of principals. Both articles seem to suggest that reciprocity is important in that the supportive communication needs to travel downwards for upward support to happen in return (Daresh, 1988; Tewel, 1987). Interestingly, both articles were published in a journal produced by a national principals association.

The use of other databases did not improve much on these findings, but a third article was identified. From a study conducted in primary schools, Reitzug (1989) reported one instance of upward supportive communication, when a teacher expressed appreciation for something the principal did. Again, this was a reciprocal interaction with the teacher giving the upward supportive message after the principal demonstrated support for the teacher (Reitzug, 1989). In more recent research conducted in primary schools De Nobile (2009) found strong statistical support for upward supportive communication as a salient aspect of the school communication network, but only one instance that referred to the phenomenon from qualitative data. Interestingly, the interaction was also a result of a reciprocation interaction.

Upward supportive communication holds potential benefits for principals, but it is difficult to find detailed descriptions of these types of interactions in the literature and what information there is has been limited. That is not to say principals aren't getting any support, but there is a need to determine how it can be harnessed.

The aims of the study reported here were threefold. Firstly, this study attempted to identify upward supportive communication as a salient aspect of organisational communication in a different sample of schools from an earlier study (De Nobile, 2007). Secondly, the study aimed to compare the frequency of upward supportive communication compared to downward and horizontal supportive communication. The third aim was to try to describe how upward supportive communication happens in terms of specific practices and suggest ways it can be encouraged in schools.

Methodology

Instruments

Data for this research were drawn from a larger study. The larger study investigated organisational communication in government, Catholic systemic and independent primary schools in every state and territory of Australia. Data were collected using the Organisational Communication in Primary Schools Questionnaire (OCPSQ) described by De Nobile and McCormick (2008), which could be used to identify and measure the existence of certain types of communication. Respondents were required to indicate the extent to which certain statements about communication were descriptive of their school on a Lickert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). From these ratings, scores for aspects of communication could later be generated. Interviews were also conducted to obtain more detailed descriptions of the aspects of communication that emerged from statistical analyses from the OCPSQ. Interviews were voluntary and all participants were invited to offer their availability for interview. Interviewees were randomly selected from the list of those offering availability in each state so that data from all states could be included.

Sample

A total of 1575 teaching and non-teaching staff members from over 140 primary schools across Australia returned useful questionnaires. As supportive communication in schools is not just an activity of teaching staff, the inclusion of non-teaching staff members was justified. Teaching staff

included classroom teachers, itinerant teachers, specialist teachers and school executive members. Non-teaching staff included administration staff, maintenance staff, teacher's aides and school counsellors. Data were entered into an SPSS database for later analyses. The interview data came from the 52 participants that were selected from the 104 who indicated availability. A breakdown of interview participants is presented in Table 1. There were no offers of availability from Victoria, Tasmania or Northern Territory. The larger number of interviewees from Western Australia reflects the substantial participation of school staff from that state compared to others.

TABLE 1: BREAKDOWN OF INTERVIEWEES BY STATE AND SECTOR

	Government	Catholic	Independent	Total State
NSW	0	9	5	14
ACT	4	3	0	7
QLD	0	0	1	1
SA	0	0	2	2
WA	28	0	0	28
Total Sector	32	12	8	52

Analyses

In order to identify aspects of organisational communication, factor analysis was conducted on the OCPSQ data. The identified sets of items comprising factors were grouped together to establish factor scores from which means could be generated to aid in later comparisons between types of supportive communication. Statistical differences identified in these comparisons were subjected to tests for significance.

Responses to interview questions regarding upward supportive communication were coded using the strategies of categorising and connection-making recommended by Maxwell and Miller (2008). This required sections of narrative (responses to interview questions) to be coded according to topic and then grouped according to emerging themes and tested against other possible conceptualisations of the original topics. The bundles of data identified as belonging to specific and unrelated categories could then be interpreted as discrete concepts (Maxwell & Miller, 2008).

Findings

Quantitative analyses

Upward supportive communication emerged as a distinct area of communication in the factor analyses along with downward supportive communication and horizontal supportive

communication. Typical items from the OCPSQ for each type of supportive communication, as well as α reliabilities, are displayed in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2: FACTOR DETAILS FOR SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION FACTORS

Factor name	Number of items	Reliability α	Sample items
Upward supportive communication	3	0.76	*Staff give moral support to the principal* *Staff members give emotional support to the principal*
Downward supportive communication	4	0.87	*The principal is encouraging* *The principal compliments staff*
Horizontal supportive communication	9	0.85	*Staff members at this school support one another* *As a staff we help each other to get through the day*

Means for each of the supportive communication factors were calculated using factor scores based on the relevant items. These means were then compared overall and by sector (government, Catholic systemic and independent) as shown in Table 3. In each case upward supportive communication had the lowest mean. This finding suggests that upward support giving, from staff members to the principal, was not as prominent a feature of communication as were downward and horizontal supportive interactions. Analysis of variance revealed that, for this sample overall, the means of upward supportive communication were significantly different from those for downward and horizontal supportive communication. A comparison of means for upward supportive communication between sectors (between groups analysis) revealed significant differences between government and Catholic schools only. The results of ANOVA for the whole sample as well as by sector are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Comparison at the individual schools level revealed a little more variability, with upward supportive communication achieving higher means than downward supportive communication in a small minority of schools. However, the trend of lower levels of upward supportive communication tended to be confirmed overall.

Figures 1, 2 and 3 in the Appendix show the means for the three types of supportive communication for a random selection of 10 schools from each sector. Schools with means for upward supportive communication higher than downward supportive communication are indicated with an asterisk on each graph. The graphs clearly suggest that, for this sample, interactions of

support giving to principals are less prominent than support provided from principal to staff members. Interestingly horizontal supportive communication appears to be the most prominent form of support giving across all sectors. In only 5 of the 30 randomly selected schools was upward support giving higher than downward support giving.

TABLE 3: MEANS OF SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION OVERALL AND BY SECTOR

	All Schools		Government		Catholic		Independent	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
UPSUP	3.65	0.71	3.55	0.71	3.74	0.70	3.70	0.72
DNSUP	3.87	0.77	3.86	0.75	3.89	0.76	3.83	0.83
HZSUP	4.01	0.52	3.97	0.52	4.03	0.50	4.05	0.54

UPSUP = Upward supportive communication
DNSUP = Downward supportive communication
HZSUP = Horizontal supportive communication

TABLE 4: ANOVA FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN UPWARD SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION, AND DOWNWARD AND HORIZONTAL SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION ACROSS ALL SECTORS

	SS	df	MS	F
DNSUP				
Between groups	287.15	12	23.93	58.27*
Within groups	623.42	1518	0.41	
Total	910.57	1530		
HZSUP				
Between groups	71.34	12	5.95	26.75*
Within groups	335.27	1509	0.22	
Total	406.61	1521		

DNSUP = Downward supportive communication
HZSUP = Horizontal supportive communication
SS = Sum of squares, df = degrees of freedom, MS = Mean square
* Significant at p<.001

TABLE 5: ANOVA FOR UPWARD SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN SECTORS

Sectors compared	SS	df	MS	F
GOV x CEO	10.89	1	10.89	12.90*
GOV x IND	2.74	1	2.74	3.25
CEO x IND	1.58	1	1.58	1.88
Error	1225.97	1452	0.84	

GOV=Government schools, CEO=Catholic schools, IND=Independent schools

SS = Sum of squares, df = degrees of freedom, MS = Mean square

* Significant at $p<.001$

Qualitative analyses

The interview question regarding upward supportive communication was designed to develop a detailed description of this elusive aspect of school communication and to attempt to explain the pattern of results in the quantitative analyses. Interviewees were asked:

> Do staff members offer moral (or other) support to the principal at this school?

> How do they do this?

Occasionally, clarifying questions were needed to elicit information relevant to the question or clarify the meaning of the question for the interviewee. The following are examples of the supplementary questions used:

> What specific instances can you recall of staff offering support to the principal?

> Have they offered encouragement to the principal, or praise?

The question was not an easy one for all interviewees to answer, for the understandable reason that it is not always easy to observe upward support taking place. As one teacher from a Catholic school put it:

> Yes, that is a tough one. I think so. Just little bits. I mean, our principal is very visible. Just seeing her in the staff room, people will be talking to her. I don't know exactly what they're saying. That's why it's a tough one ...

However, the assumption was made that if upward support giving is a part of the school culture, there is a chance it would be observed and reportable. Therefore, at this point it is worth analysing the quality of the responses overall.

Of the 52 interviewees, 60% were able to give descriptions of upward supportive communication. These were either descriptions of general behaviours observed among colleagues, descriptions of specific examples of upward support giving or a combination of both. A further 11% were only able to say that it happens in very general terms with no examples of behaviour

elicited despite supplementary questions. Twenty-nine percent did not provide any information about upward supportive communication despite clarifying and probing questions. These respondents either described behaviour that was not consistent with upward support, stated that they could not describe any examples of it because of the 'hard to see' factor, or stated definitively that upward supportive communication did not happen in their school as far as they knew. Analysis of the interview responses was, therefore, limited to answers of the 71% who responded specifically or generally.

As analyses of the interview data commenced it became apparent that two main categories of information were emerging. The first, more voluminous, set of data contained descriptions of types of upward supportive communication. These were categorised further according to each specific type of support. The second set of data contained information that appeared to describe conditions that influenced the occurrence of upward supportive communication in the participating schools. Cross comparison with subsets of each main category revealed no overlapping concepts (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). Neither were significant conflicts within each category found. Therefore, the data were judged as an accurate set of descriptions of upward supportive communication for the study.

Tables 6 and 7 present the two main categories of 'Types of upward support' and 'Conditions' and the frequencies of statements for each sub-category (type of support or condition). The frequency refers to the number of mentions of a particular type by school, meaning, for example, that if an interviewee described two or more instances of the same type of upward support, it counted as <u>one</u> mention for the school. This was done to avoid exaggerating any data and resultant errors of interpretation.

TABLE 6: FREQUENCIES OF TYPES OF UPWARD SUPPORT

Type of upward support	Freq (n)
Affirmation	18
Share workload	8
Cooperation	7
Giving	4
Advice	3
Social gesture	3
Social activity	3
Encouragement	3
Listening	2
General (non-specific)	7

TABLE 7: FREQUENCIES OF TYPES OF CONDITION

Condition on upward support	Freq (n)
Reciprocity	10
Principal's role	4
Climate	4

Types of Upward Supportive Communication

The following are detailed descriptions of each sub-category of upward supportive communication. Quotes from interviews are used to illustrate each of these. General comments about upward support have been left to the end of the section as these do not describe specific types of support, but are useful as illustrations of the responses.

Affirmation
Affirmation was the most frequently mentioned type of upward support. It refers to instances when staff members have praised or acknowledged the principal's efforts specifically or their work generally. Telling the principal that they did something well or that they were doing a good job was at the heart of this type of support. The following quotes from interviews typify the kind of response. The first is from a teacher in a Catholic systemic school from New South Wales while the second comes from a teacher in a government school in Western Australia.

> I explicitly tell her when she [principal] has said or done something that is particularly well done.

> There are times when people have said yes that was a good call.

Share workload
Staff members in this study communicated support to the principal by offering to reduce the burden by sharing workload by assisting or taking on extra work. Congruent with the saying 'actions speak louder than words', these interactions are intended to show support in non-verbal ways. For example, a lower primary teacher from a Western Australian government school explicitly described sharing workload as a form of support observing:

> Yes, staff understand the difficult role of the principal and are supportive – by undertaking extra duties, taking on extra responsibilities regarding children with behavioural problems.

One teacher, from an independent college in New South Wales, provided an example of the extent to which staff members might offer upward support to the principal through sharing workload. In this case, a classroom teacher has offered to take on administrative tasks, and suggests this is not an uncommon occurrence in the school.

> I personally have offered to help him if we've got one of the deputies off and of course three positions become two so those two people end up very overworked. I have frequently offered to assist with office paperwork or anything else and I know I wouldn't be the only person to have done that.

Cooperation

This type of support is, again, mainly non-verbal. It is typified by overt signs of respect for decisions and compliance with demands of the principal. The following comment by an early childhood teacher in a Western Australian government school presents an example of cooperation as upward support.

> People will generally give their support by agreeing (show of hands).

Another comment, this time from a government school teacher from the Australian Capital Territory, described this type of support as both moral and professional.

> The majority [of staff] offer both moral and professional support and are behind our principal in every decision that is made.

Giving

There were several examples of this type of upward support encompassing many types of actions, including giving gifts as thanks or appreciation, providing food or drink for a principal under stress or who is sick, and organising celebrations. One Western Australian teacher listed 'small gifts, cards, morning tea' as tangible signs of upward support-giving. However, upward supportive communication via giving is exemplified by the following observation of a Catholic school teacher from the Australian Capital Territory.

> When he [principal] turned fifty we decorated his office door with balloons, signs, stars, etcetera, and put on a lovely morning tea as a surprise ...

An executive staff member from a Catholic school in New South Wales referred to support through giving gifts at times when the principal is navigating the school through difficult times. She noted that a particularly difficult day for her principal triggered:

> Flower delivery from admin staff to principal on day of grade change announcement (trying day!!).

Advice

Advice giving may be viewed as a professional support. This might take the form of information to help principals deal with emerging situations or, potentially, providing new principals with insights from experiences in dealing with parts of the school community. It would seem that this type of support may be most useful to newly appointed principals. The following comments from a religious education coordinator in a New South Wales Catholic school shed some light on advice giving as support.

> They have advised her [principal] of difficult parents ... the principal is briefed on current information about situations that have occurred prior to her appointment.

There are times, however, when the experienced principal might welcome support by way of advice or opinion from staff while trying to make decisions. This recollection from a teacher at a government school in the Australian Capital Territory illustrates this form of advice giving.

> Recently I popped in to speak to the principal about certificates, or something relating to the end of year, and she asked me to sit with her. We chatted at length about the different

> options for classes for next year. As usual it is a tricky job to complete, and she was happy to listen to any suggestions.

Social gesture

Social gestures may include dropping into the principal's office to say 'hello', or non-verbal gestures like a smile or a hug. They are a less obvious, but nevertheless important way for teachers and other staff members to communicate support up to the principal. These behaviours were reported by interviewees. The following quotes typify social gesture as upward supportive communication and demonstrate how non-verbal and verbal interaction is combined as social gesture. The first is from an assistant principal in a New South Wales Catholic school, while the second is from a teacher assistant in a Western Australian public school. The second quote was given in the context of a principal who had an ongoing health issue at the time of the study, and points to the fact that upward support is not just for professional purposes, but relates to personal issues as well.

> Some staff (a few) say good morning every day. I do and add a smile.

> We always pop in and say 'Hi. How you going?' sort of thing.

Social activity

Upward support from social activity occurs when staff engage in a social activity and the principal experiences support not necessarily from the activity itself but from the social interactions or feelings of connection that come from participating. The upward supportive communication happens through interactions with staff in an environment different from school. An assistant principal from a New South Wales Catholic school commented:

> The principal and some staff enjoy a game of squash and a drink afterwards some evenings.

One statement from a deputy principal in a Western Australian government school made a link between upward supportive communication, from social activity, and school climate, asserting that:

> We have numerous social get togethers which builds support networks and encourages an open and trusting work environment. This works both ways: principal to staff and staff to principal.

Encouragement

It was anticipated that, as a form of upward support, this type of behaviour might feature more prominently, but it was mentioned in only three schools. Additionally, there was a concern that encouragement was very similar conceptually to affirmation. However, a second-level, contiguity-based analysis of the data (Maxwell & Miller, 2008) suggested that the two categories were indeed relating to different types of behaviour, however subtle.

Encouragement takes the form of providing confidence or 'egging on'. It might be particularly useful when principals are experiencing uncertainty about the directions they are leading the school towards or in relation to specific decisions. Such interactions offer backup and support to keeping going in the same way that a colleague might do for someone who is losing confidence in what they are doing. One deputy principal from a government school in Western Australia described a particular instance of encouragement as upward supportive communication:

> Recently I said to our principal 'don't worry, you are on top of this. You are responding
> in exactly the most appropriate way ...'.

We are reminded that encouragement as upward supportive communication is not just a behaviour of teaching staff. One of the non-teaching staff members (maintenance staff) declared from the point of view of school physical site work:

> I have given my principal encouragement when trying to get work done around the
> school and also when applying for grants ...

Listening

One way in which people offer support to one another is simply listening. Listening can convey understanding, recognition and empathy. Although there were only two instances described in this study, it is an important aspect of upward support as non-verbal communication. One teacher from an independent Christian school in New South Wales offered the following as an example of upward support:

> ... some staff decision he's made that may be unpopular, I like to go and have a talk to
> him about it and just let him sound off about how he feels about it.

The principal usually leads an executive team and this might be one avenue where upward support through listening can occur. An assistant principal from a New South Wales Catholic school offers some insight into this, suggesting a form of emotional support, by recalling:

> [The] Leadership team meets informally with [the] principal to ask how she is going and
> to allow for 'venting' time (behind closed doors).

General (non-specific)

Several of the interviewees provided general statements about upward supportive communication in their schools, describing it in terms of a 'big picture'. Most of the comments recorded formed part of the 11% that were solely general in nature, but a few were elaborated on later in interviews. Two comments that typify this kind of response were from a teacher in a South Australian independent college and a teacher from a Western Australian government school respectively.

> Moral support is offered to the current principal by most of the staff.

> ... he [principal] certainly has support from a lot of staff members, including me.

Conditions on Upward Supportive Communication

The conditions on upward supportive communication were identified as factors that may limit or enhance upward supportive communication. Three distinct areas were identified. Again, quotes from interviews have been used to elucidate the concepts.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity was the most prominent condition in terms of the number of comments made. It refers to the idea that action by someone results in a reciprocal action by another in response. In relation to upward supportive communication the term was chosen to describe the notion that for it to happen, downward supportive communication must also be taking place. Specifically, this category of condition referred to comments that suggested staff members support the principal because the principal offers support to them. Some comments alluded to reciprocity as a process of

give and take while others went further, describing a mutual support giving that was part of the school culture. The following comment, from an executive teacher in a New South Wales Catholic school, refers to reciprocity as an ongoing process. Clearly, the principal's lack of downward support has led to a lack of upward support in return.

> At present the staff are not really finding the Principal supportive to them so in return they do not really offer her support.

The following comments relate to how reciprocity was perceived a part of the school culture. The first is from a deputy principal of an independent college in Queensland, while the second comes from a teacher in an independent South Australian school.

> An ethos of giving individuals positive and supportive comments exists and this is extended to the principal.

> There is an unspoken ethos of professionalism within the school that dictates one should support the principal.

Principal's role

This category describes the notion that support giving is solely the principal's (and as extension perhaps school leadership team's) role and, logically, teachers do not need to support the principal (or school leaders). The following comment, from a teacher at a Catholic school in the Australian Capital Territory, suggests that this is a common view among staff at the school.

> As the principal the support is probably less as they are seen as the main support for the school to all staff, students and parents.

The following quote is from a teacher at a government school in Western Australia. This teacher's comment alludes to an attitude of expectation in relation to downward support that might preclude upward support.

> There is an expectation that [the principal] will support them [certain staff members], sometimes in untenable positions, without question ... I believe some staff find it difficult to express support for [the principal] or to thank her.

School climate

Three comments referred to the need for openness, trust and similar conditions to exist for upward supportive communication to happen. As levels of openness and trust are key components of school climate (Hoy & Miskel, 2008), the category was so termed. The following comment from a Western Australian government school teacher provides a good example of how a positive climate can facilitate the exchange of support.

> Everyone is able to talk easily to the principal and he is very open to suggestions and ideas.

The following comment from an executive staff member of a South Australian independent school suggests a direct link between upward supportive communication and the level of openness in the school climate, particularly between principal and staff.

> Moral support (or other) is only as good as the need for the HOS to ask for, or accept it.

Other possible conditions on upward support were identified, but as they were single comments not supported by corresponding comments from other interviewees, they were not considered strong enough themes to create categories. For example, one teacher mentioned work

intensification resulting in reduced opportunities to see their principal as the reason why they do not affirm or in other ways offer upward support.

Principals Need Support from Staff

> That is immense in relation to your own morale because you feel like well okay there is at least one or two other people out there that believe in what you're trying to achieve.

This quote is from James (pseudonym) a principal of a large metropolitan public school in Perth, Western Australia. His words clearly demonstrate the importance school leaders place on upward support from staff. It suggests that principals and other school leaders need support at least as much as other staff members do. The following comments from Patricia (pseudonym), a principal of a Catholic school in rural New South Wales, provide a 'principal's eye view' of the support from staff and how it is appreciated and valued.

> The staff are incredibly supportive of the principal, especially at this end of the year when things are hectic. Teachers offer to do duties, assist with submissions, etcetera, and generally make sure they check in to see how I am going. I value their support immensely.

It is not simply about relieving workload that Patricia is appreciative of. There is an element of being supported by staff members emotionally and socially. She goes on to declare:

> They are very positive and affirming, which is always gratefully received.

A major barrier to this kind of support, as has been illustrated in the previous section, is the notion that leaders, especially principals, are there to support staff and, therefore, don't really need support themselves. James, the principal from Western Australia, appears to recognise this, conceding later in the interview:

> I think it's the nature of the beast, and particularly when I was a teacher, that you don't necessarily think the principal needs that and that their job is to support you as a teacher.

The comments from these two principals offer insight into the importance of upward supportive communication. It appears to be important not just for the sense of affirmation for the directions they are leading the school into and the decisions they are making, but also for their own level of morale. It follows that upward supportive communication might be somewhat linked to principals' feeling about their work, such as job satisfaction and job commitment, but the absence of data suggesting these links precludes further comment.

Discussion

Upward supportive communication emerged as a salient aspect of organisational communication in this study as evidenced by the results of factor analyses, along with two other types of supportive communication (downward and horizontal). This allowed for a comparison of the three types of supportive communication which revealed upward supportive communication appeared to be the least prominent (or least observed). The difference was found to be statistically significant across the three schooling sectors.

However, while the pattern was consistent across government, Catholic and independent schools overall, between groups analyses indicated that only the government and Catholic schools had significant differences in upward supportive communication between them, with the mean for schools in the Catholic sector much higher than that of the government sector. This difference might be explained by the ethos of Catholic schools generally. Recent research has found the cultures in Catholic schools to be characterised by collegiality, sense of community and highly supportive relationships while government schools were less likely to have those features (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009; Dorner, Spillane & Pustejovsky, 2011). Therefore the higher occurrence of upward supportive communication might be a reflection of highly collegial and supportive school cultures.

An overwhelming majority of the independent schools have religious or faith based communities, and the fact that the means of upward supportive communication were higher for these schools compared to government schools may reflect a similar culture difference between these two sectors, even though the difference was not found to be statistically significant.

The question of why upward supportive communication appears not to be as prominent a feature of the organisational communication milieu is not easy to answer categorically, but the qualitative data suggest it might be due to a prevailing notion among staff members that it is the principal's role to communicate support down to staff and not the other way round. The notion of the 'principals' role' emerged from the interview data as a probable limiting condition on upward supportive communication, and one of the principals interviewed suggested this to be true of most schools. The notion of reciprocity, a mode of thinking along the lines of 'I will support the principal if he/she supports me' might also be a limiting factor if the principal is not perceived to be supportive by staff members.

Another possible reason for the lower prominence of upward supportive communication might relate to the fact that this phenomenon can be hard to see. Recalling that not all interviewees were able to answer the question about upward supportive communication in their schools, it is not hard to understand why there are very few studies concerning upward supportive communication in the literature concerning educational leadership or schools as organisations.

The interviews suggest that upward support can be communicated in several ways, not all involving verbal interaction, though affirmation, a verbal act, was the most frequently mentioned by the participants. Other verbal forms of upward supportive communication included advice giving, social activity and encouragement. There were five types of non-verbal upward support identified from the interviews, including sharing workload, cooperation, giving, social gesture and listening. As communication is known to happen both verbally and non-verbally (Dwyer, 2009), reference to these behaviours as upward supportive communication is quite acceptable. The many types of support indicate that the phenomenon can have a number of manifestations.

The non-verbal behaviours, in particular, are worth discussing in the light of the organisational and interpersonal communication literature. De Vito (1998) describes how facial communication can be used to convey a number of feelings. Staff members who engage in social gestures like smiling at the principal to convey support are using facial communication to try to influence the mood of their principal in a positive way (DeVito, 1998) or at least get a positive response (Hickson, Stacks & Moore, 2004). Social gestures also include forms of touch such as hugging and placing a hand on the shoulder. Touching has been recognised as a way to

communicate support for the other person (De Vito, 1998; Dwyer, 2009). Hugging and a touch on the arm or shoulder have been categorised as nonverbal behaviours consistent with social politeness and friendship or warmth according to a classic study by Heslin (1974, cited in Hickson, Stacks & Moore, 2004). Referring to other studies, Hickson, Stacks and Moore (2004) go on to assert that the various forms of touch become channels via which individuals can convey appreciation, affection and other feelings congruent with support.

Sharing workload as upward support also makes sense in light of literature. Doing favours and extra work for others has been recognised in the interpersonal communication literature as a way individuals show care for one another (Hickson, Stacks & Moore, 2004). It follows that sharing workload would be viewed by principals as a kind of support. Giving has also been recognised in the literature as a potential form of support. Giving is often done of course to maintain friendship (Hickson, Stacks & Moore, 2004). De Vito (1998) describes instances where people give gifts to express appreciation and thanks.

Staff members who engage in listening as upward support are able to convey empathy or understanding to their principal through their attentive body language as well as any paraphrasing or 'supportive eye contact' (Dwyer, 2009, p. 15). Very recent research in the area of supportive listening confirmed the notion that individuals who actively listen to those needing support are considered to be good supporters (Bodie & Jones, 2012). The findings of that study, however, suggest that other non-verbal behaviours that occur during instances of supportive listening may have a role to play in perceptions of supportiveness.

The voices of principals were also heard in the qualitative data. Both principals who were interviewed clearly valued upward supportive communication from staff members and, indeed, indicated that it might contribute to their levels of morale and satisfaction. It is not inconceivable that principals should desire, and in fact need, support from staff members. The results of this study suggest that support giving need not be a one way process from the top down. However, the conditions identified might need to be overcome through professional development or (dealing with the other condition on upward supportive communication identified in this study) culture change that promotes trusting relationships and openness.

Conclusion

Upward supportive communication was identified as a salient and measurable aspect of organisational communication in schools. Compared with other forms of supportive communication (downward and horizontal) it was the least prominent overall regardless of school sector (government, Catholic or independent). While there were slight differences in the means of upward supportive communication between sectors, the trend was consistent with the overall pattern and only the difference between government and Catholic schools was found to be statistically significant.

Despite its low apparent frequency in relation to other forms of supportive communication, several categories of behaviour were identified as types of upward supportive communication, providing an insight into the phenomenon. These types of upward support, verbal and non-verbal, suggest the way it can occur in schools, provided the conditions are optimal.

Three conditions that might enhance or limit upward supportive communication were identified. These present implications for schools with regard to increasing upward support for the principal. If reciprocity is indeed a condition influencing upward supportive communication, it might be wise for principals to examine the quality and quantity of support they provide to staff members, and if necessary, find opportunities to engage in downward supportive communication more frequently and in ways that improve staff morale. The mind-set that it is the principal's role to give support to staff members might then begin to change to one engendering mutual support, collegiality and sense of community. This in turn could, potentially result in a more supportive, trusting and open school climate. Issues around school climate, however, need to be addressed if key elements such as trust and openness are found to be at low levels, as this in turn could impact on reciprocity and perception of principal role.

Finally, the voices of principals themselves emerged from the data, suggesting that principals (and no doubt other school leaders) value and need upward supportive communication. They might get some from the system or wider community but it is with staff members in their school that they interact the most and, therefore, derive much of the support that can potentially help nourish their morale, satisfaction with, and commitment to their work.

The research described in this article is of course limited. Much of the data came from school staff members. Only a handful of principals were involved. Therefore, much of the findings were contingent on the observations of staff members. It is not surprising that a third of the interviewees were unable to report on upward supportive communication, as these interactions might occur mostly one to one between principal and staff member. There is a clear need to investigate the phenomenon further from the principal's point of view and so future research needs to focus on interviews with principals.

Despite these limits, the findings reported here provide some insight into the state of the art of this important aspect of organisational communication and it is a contribution, however small, to the very limited literature on a somewhat elusive topic.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix

Means of supportive communication for 10 schools in each sector

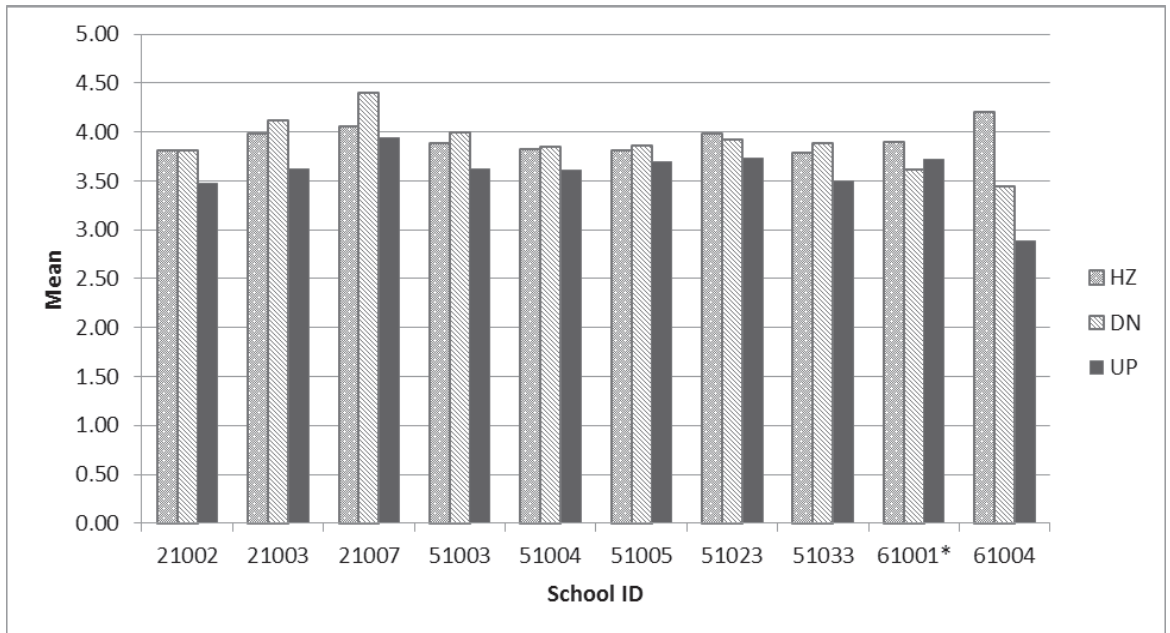**FIGURE 1: MEANS OF SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION IN 10 RANDOMLY SELECTED GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS**

FIGURE 2: MEANS OF SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION IN 10 RANDOMLY SELECTED CATHOLIC SCHOOLS
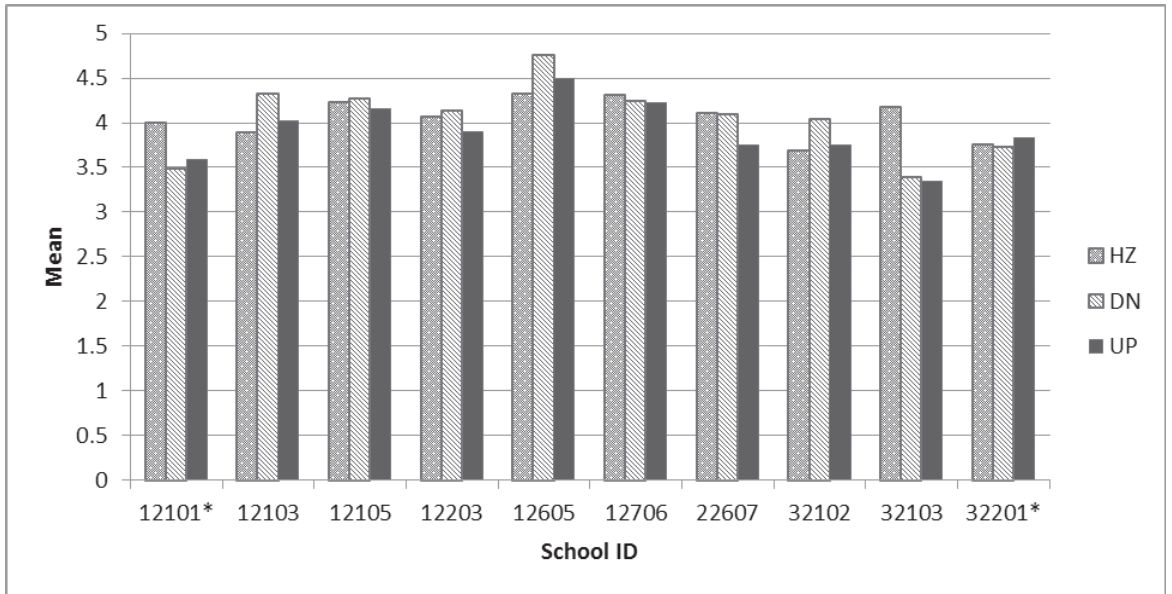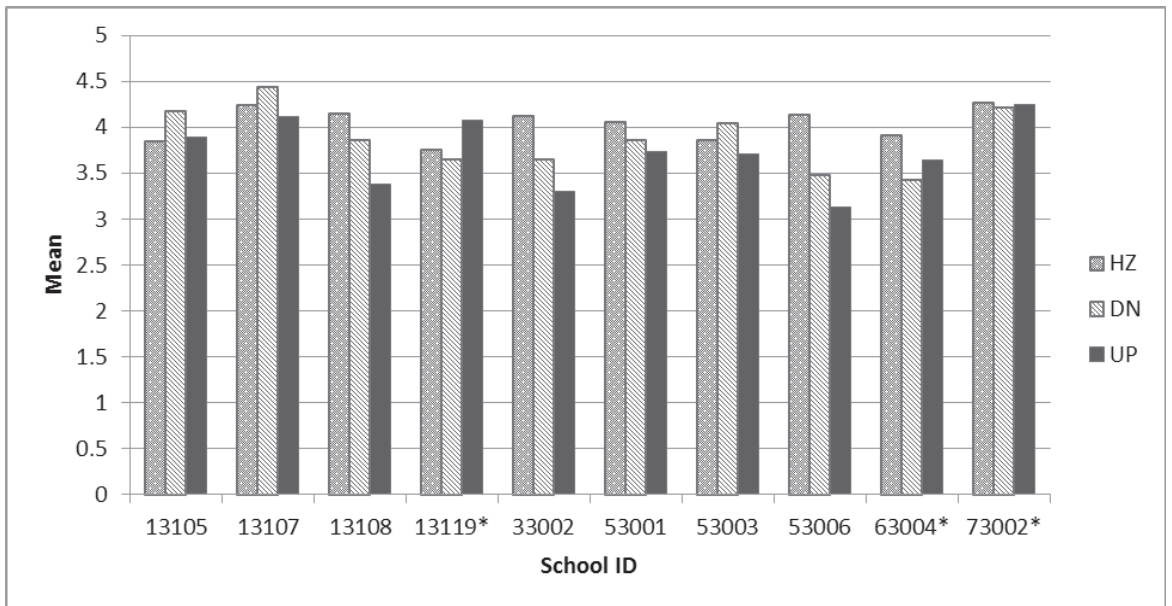

FIGURE 3: MEANS OF SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION IN 10 RANDOMLY SELECTED INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

* Upward supportive communication higher than Downward supportive communication