

## **Democratic Communication in Catholic Primary Schools**

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### ***Abstract***

*Participation in workplace decision making has become an increasingly prominent feature of organisational life over the past two decades. Such participation has been linked to job attitudes such as job satisfaction and stress. Conceptualised as Democratic Communication, participation in decision making, among other democratic practices, was investigated in the context of Catholic primary schools as part of a larger study. Three hundred and fifty six staff members from primary schools in Catholic diocesan systems across New South Wales were involved in the study. Quantitative and qualitative data were obtained using a questionnaire survey.*

*In this paper, Democratic Communication is described as a quantitatively measured 'factor' and is investigated in further depth using qualitative data. The results suggest that Democratic Communication both benefits and poses problems for schools.*

### **Introduction**

Communication performs several functions in organisations. It can be used to share information or for the purpose of persuasion (Dwyer, 2003; Samson & Daft, 2005). Leaders may communicate support for subordinates and acculturate new members (Macgeorge, Samter & Gillihan, 2005; Rosenfeld & Richman, 1999). People in organisations also communicate to innovate in response to a changed environment (Goldhaber, 1993; Rafferty & Parker, 2006). Another type of communication has emerged as a result of trends in the 1980s and 1990s toward devolution of authority and increased employee participation in decision making in many types of organisations, including schools (Bantz, 1993; Chapman, 1988; Seibold & Shea, 2001). Communication that has to do with participation in decision making may be referred to as Democratic Communication.

### **The concept of Democratic Communication**

The concept of Democratic Communication, as it applies here, has its origins in literature that describes staff involvement in organisational decision-making (Gordon & Grant, 2006; Rice & Schneider, 1994; Stohl & Cheney, 2001), and teamwork,

which entails collaborative participation in decision making (Corrie, 1995; Pang, 1998; Samson & Daft, 2005; Southworth, 2000). Over the last few decades, increasing numbers of organisations, and especially schools, have experienced greater staff member participation in decision-making (Bantz, 1993; Chapman, 1988; Seibold & Shea, 2001; Stohl & Cheney, 2001).

Stohl and Cheney (2001) defined participation (in decision making) as a type of organisational communication. The term “democratic” is appropriate to use here because participation in decision making and involvement in organisational improvement have frequently been described as democratic activities (Deery, Plowman & Walsh, 1997; Eagley, Karau & Johnson, 1992; Epp, 1993; Evans, 1998; Hoy & Sousa, 1984; Seibold & Shea, 2001; Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Wilson, 2002).

Democratic Communication occurs in a number of ways in schools. Among the most common examples are committees, submission of suggestions and individuals having a voice in decisions made by the group (Epp, 1993; Marsh, 2004; Seibold & Shea, 2001). Democratic Communication may involve the principal seeking input from staff (Hoy & Sousa, 1984). This form of downward communication invites upward interactions and, therefore, encourages two way dialogues between staff and school administration. Such input is successful when principals indicate that it is valued (Epp, 1993). Democratic Communication may also happen horizontally through the collaborative work of teams and committees (Corrie, 1995; Samson & Daft, 2005). It may be used to facilitate school decisions on a wide variety of issues including: teaching programs, report design, assessment, budgeting, discipline policy, use of text books, student rights, staff hiring, school goals and school mission (Rice & Schneider, 1994; Taylor & Bogotch, 1994).

Democratic Communication benefits schools in a number of ways. It has generally been associated with positive attitudes to work (Dunford, 1992; Haughey & Murphy, 1983; Rice & Schneider, 1994). Prominent among the factors associated with Democratic Communication are morale and job satisfaction. For example, the study by Pang (1998) revealed positive staff morale to be the result of team collaboration involved in participative management at a school. A more recent study by De Nobile

and McCormick (in press) reported strong positive associations between Democratic Communication and increased job satisfaction.

Several studies have linked Democratic Communication to improved organisational commitment of staff (Dunford, 1992; Pang, 1998; Rapert & Wren, 1998). Rapert and Wren (1998) suggested that Democratic Communication might motivate staff to become more involved in the organisation, which in turn may lead to better performance. Similarly, Hajnal, Walker and Sackney (1998) reported that Democratic Communication (collaboration) predicted school effectiveness. Democratic Communication has also been associated with staff feelings of empowerment (Reitzug, 1994).

There are a number of problems that may be associated with Democratic Communication. Firstly, a number of studies have suggested that poor quality of Democratic Communication may have negative impacts on staff attitudes. Stohl and Cheney (2001) warn of the possibility of enforced democracy. An example of this is when one is forced to engage in decision making oriented meetings. Having to participate in Democratic Communication, whether one wants to have a say or not is an undemocratic notion and can lead staff to harbour negative feelings about the organisation (Stohl & Cheney 2001).

Another experience that may elicit negative attitudes in staff members is what Epp (1993) termed “pseudo-participation”. This is Democratic Communication that, while appearing on the surface to be participation, does not change anything and is generally undertaken for political reasons (Epp, 1993). Brown and Starkey (1994) reported on interview data that suggested the time required by Democratic Communication may slow down decision making required to respond to a crisis.

Despite the large body of literature describing participation in decision making and teamwork and their effects on organisations, the actual concept of Democratic Communication has not been sufficiently studied as a phenomenon. The research reported here seeks to shed some light on Democratic Communication and how it impacts on the work of teachers.

## **Method**

Democratic Communication was investigated as part of a larger study of organisational communication in schools. This study was exploratory, with the aim of identifying Democratic Communication as a salient communication variable and exploring the ways in which school staff members experience it. This would result in a description of Democratic Communication as it applies to Catholic primary schools. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected.

## ***Participants***

Catholic schools were chosen for their general philosophy which encourages inclusion, the valued contribution of individuals and democratic principles (Flynn & Mok, 2002). The participants (n = 356) were staff members from Catholic primary schools in New South Wales, Australia. In terms of gender, the participants were representative of the general population of the Catholic diocesan systems from which they were drawn (14% male, 85% female). The participants were drawn from all geographical regions of the state (metropolitan, coastal, rural and remote). With the permission of their principals, the participants were invited to complete a questionnaire survey. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured.

## ***Instrument***

The Organisational Communication in Primary Schools Questionnaire (OCPSQ) was designed to identify a number of communication variables, including Democratic Communication. Aspects of participation in decision-making and collaborative team work were operationalised into questionnaire items. These were statements concerning downward, upward and horizontal Democratic Communication. Downward Democratic Communication items concerned how principals encourage staff input and participation in school decision-making. Upward Democratic Communication items concerned ways in which staff members actually contribute to school decision making. Horizontal Democratic Communication items concerned instances of teamwork and collaboration by staff members at similar hierarchical levels. Five items were generated for each direction of Democratic Communication. These items were intermixed with items representing other communication variables to minimise response set bias (Babbie, 1995).

Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which each item was indicative of communication at their school on a Likert-type scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for later scoring. Additionally, the OCPSQ concluded with an open-ended question inviting participants to make any further comments they wished about communication at their schools.

### *Analyses*

Data from questionnaire items were entered on to an SPSS database. Factor analysis, using principal axis factoring and an oblimin rotation was employed to identify underlying data structures (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1998). Statements from the open ended question were coded according to their content and separated into theme categories (Krathwohl, 1998). These were then cross-checked to ensure categories were conceptually logical and distinct (Erlandson et al, 1993).

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Quantitative analysis*

Factor analysis of the OCPSQ items revealed a ten-factor solution that accounted for 59% of the variance. The solution was checked using the criteria of eigenvalues greater than unity and examination of a scree plot. The total factor solution is described in greater detail elsewhere (De Nobile, 2003). However, the factor solution is summarised in Table 1, followed by brief descriptions of the factors.

Table 1. Factor solution for OCPSQ items.

Factor name	Number of items	Eigenvalue	Reliability (alpha)
Vertical openness of communication	13	21.99	0.95
Horizontal supportive communication	10	4.79	0.89
Directive communication	3	2.51	0.61
Access to communication channels	5	1.64	0.84
Cultural communication	6	1.61	0.81
Vertical load of communication	2	1.49	0.45
Upward supportive communication	3	1.18	0.85
Downward supportive communication	6	1.17	0.94
Adequacy of information	4	1.15	0.63
Democratic Communication	7	1.03	0.85

*Vertical openness of communication* concerned openness between the principal and staff members. *Horizontal supportive communication* concerned support shared among peers. *Directive communication* was concerned with instruction giving and compliance gaining by the principal. *Access to communication channels* concerned opportunities to communicate with the principal through official channels. *Cultural communication* concerned the transmission of cultural information among staff members. *Vertical load of communication* related to the amount of information flowing between staff members and the principal. This factor was retained despite its relatively low alpha reliability because of its interpretability. The low Cronbach  $\alpha$  was no doubt the result of there being only two items. *Upward supportive communication* concerned staff members giving support to the principal. *Downward supportive communication* was related to how principals communicate support to staff members. *Adequacy of information* was concerned with the perception of sufficiency and accuracy of information.

Although it was originally conceptualised and anticipated as three factors (upward, downward and horizontal), *Democratic Communication* emerged as a single factor. It comprised seven items. These items concerned staff participation in decision-making activities and teamwork.

Three items related to upward communication flow and upward influence. These were "The principal allows staff to contribute their thoughts on issues", "The principal listens to suggestions from staff" and "Staff are able to influence the principal's decisions". The item "The principal asks for input from staff on policy issues" is about the downward request for upward communication in policy development, which can be interpreted as democratic behaviour by the principal. The item "Staff are encouraged to work with one another to change or review aspects of the school's organisation" is consistent with horizontal Democratic Communication.

Some items originally written to represent different aspects of Democratic Communication had stronger statistical associations with and, therefore, became part of the factors *Vertical openness of communication* (for example "The principal is willing to listen to staff"), *Access to communication channels* (for example, "Staff at

this school have ample opportunities to see the principal about work issues”) and *Downward supportive communication* (for example, “The principal indicates that the opinions of staff are worthwhile”). This was not problematic as the items fitted well within these other factors.

Despite the emergence of only a single factor called *Democratic Communication*, as distinct from the anticipated three factors, the result is still important because of its emergence from unbiased empirical data. The strong alpha reliability ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ) and the coherency among the seven items suggest a conceptually sound communication variable that may be measured in organisations, particularly Catholic primary schools. The factor is conceptually consistent with aspects of Catholic philosophy as expressed by schools and school leaders (Flynn & Mok, 2002).

### ***Qualitative analysis***

The last item of the OCPSQ, invited respondents to make any comments about communication at their school. One hundred and three participants responded to this item, providing 260 statements. These were recorded, sorted and analysed according to the qualitative data methodology described previously. An iterative process of content analysis was used to categorise statements under distinct headings. Once categories were organised, they were evaluated and re-evaluated for consistency several times. Thirty-two initial categories were ultimately refined to 26. Each category name represented an aspect of organisational communication. Several of these categories were conceptually related to the statistical factors described earlier. Sixteen statements were to do with aspects and degrees of democracy in communication practices. These were further divided into categories of Democratic and Undemocratic Communication.

Eight statements provided evidence of behaviour consistent with Democratic Communication in these schools through involvement in decision making, collaboration and teamwork. It is apparent that Democratic Communication can yield constructive and beneficial results for schools. For example, the following two statements from a teacher and school secretary suggest that Democratic

Communication benefits staff members by way of developing a sense of belonging and support through assistance and collaboration:

*“The school’s development is collaborative; one assisting another.”*

and

*“Very satisfied secretary- always made to feel a valued part of team”.*

It is clear that Democratic Communication can have a beneficial effect on school climate and staff perceptions of a safe environment, as evidenced in the following statement by a middle-primary teacher:

*“The different committees / work done and negotiated has also been a plus for the safety and unity in developing a sound school environment.”*

One comment from an experienced teacher indicated acceptance that Democratic Communication cannot suit the needs of all staff and that disappointment is inevitable:

*“I think that the ‘key’ is that the principal listens, but that the staff realise that, in some instances, decisions are made that do not always suit individuals.”*

Staff members who do not embrace Democratic Communication can disappoint those who do. This is evident in the following comment by a male executive member:

*“There exists an atmosphere of teachers wanting greater influence in forums of decision making without taking any responsibility.”*

It was also apparent that Democratic Communication is related to openness of communication. For example, a principal who elicits suggestions from staff to make it appear that they are part of the decision-making process and who does nothing more with the suggestions is not being entirely open to staff. Conversely, participation in school-based decisions and teams requires some degree of open communication. This relationship warrants further investigation, however, it would help to explain why the items originally written for Democratic Communication had stronger statistical associations with the *Vertical openness of communication* factor as mentioned earlier.

Another eight statements provided evidence of behaviour contrary to Democratic Communication through the hesitancy of some staff members to engage in Democratic Communication, or a general lack of it. These were categorised as *Undemocratic Communication*. Some comments that referred to problems associated with Undemocratic Communication reinforced how much school staff members value Democratic Communication behaviour, such as teamwork and collaborative planning. Two good examples are these statements by a female teacher with more than 15 years experience and a younger, female teacher with less than five years experience respectively:

*“would like to see more opportunity for teachers in similar grades eg. upper primary, middle, to meet and discuss issues as a team.”*

and

*“ I also believe that those who sit ‘on the fence’ waiting for the facts/ information to come along are falling short of their team effort”*

These statements also suggest that the lack of Democratic Communication is a source of disappointment and frustration for teachers.

Two statements referred to behaviour that could be called ‘pseudo-participation’ according to Epp (1993). This insight was offered by a female teacher with less than 5 years experience:

*“Sometimes the principal will listen, but a lot of times she has already decided what to do with the executive teachers”*

The following statement was from a more experienced female teacher:

*“Sometimes “indicating” that the staff’s input is important is all that the principal does. Sometimes I feel the decision has been made but the staff will be asked to make it look like we have a say.”*

Other participants felt that they were left out of their schools’ decision making process altogether. An example was this comment by an experienced male executive member:

*“ Staff are asked their views, but are rarely acted upon, hence staff don’t see the need in contributing to decision making”.*

The findings reported here would appear to support previous literature indicating that Democratic Communication practices are beneficial to schools. For example, the effects of team collaboration on staff feelings of affiliation and support reported earlier are congruent with positive morale (Dunford, 1992; Pang, 1998). It is obvious, from the statements, that staff wish to be involved in school wide decision-making processes and view such activity as important. This is also indicative of commitment to the job and the organisation (Pang, 1998; Rapert & Wren, 1998; Samson & Daft, 2005).

Negative aspects of Democratic Communication included disappointment and frustration with its absence. This is to be expected given the value some participants placed on it. Indeed, the larger study found that *Democratic Communication* was related to job satisfaction and occupational stress, suggesting that low levels of Democratic Communication would be associated with lower levels of job satisfaction and increased stress (De Nobile, 2003). There is a substantial amount of literature suggesting a positive relationship between Democratic Communication behaviours and job satisfaction (for example, Davis & Wilson, 2000; Evans, 1998; Samson & Daft, 2005). There is a correspondingly large body of literature suggesting Democratic Communication practices are related to reduced occupational stress (for example, Brown & Ralph, 1992; McCormick, 1997; Spielberger & Reheiser, 1995).

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the concept of Democratic Communication through quantitative and qualitative means. A communication factor called *Democratic Communication* was identified from empirical data analysis. This factor concerned staff participation in school decision-making and collaboration. Examination of qualitative data revealed two categories that further explained how Democratic Communication might be experienced in these Catholic primary schools.

Qualitative statements concerning *Democratic Communication* described the benefits of working as part of a team in terms of satisfaction, positive morale and commitment. Teamwork and collaboration appeared to be highly valued by the respondents. Statements concerning *Undemocratic Communication* described how a lack of Democratic Communication can be problematic. A lack of opportunity to engage in

Democratic Communication or the presence of 'pseudo-participation' may lead to disappointment and frustration of teachers and other staff members.

This study has revealed some aspects of a relatively new concept of organisational communication. However, due to the limited amount of qualitative data, the scope of the study is rather small and the implication is that *Democratic Communication* should be investigated in greater depth. Inclusion of interview data would accommodate a deeper description of the phenomenon and how it influences schools and school staff members. The large proportion of female participants, while typical of the population of teachers in these schools, might have had some influence on the results reported here. It would be interesting to see if similar results would be achieved if the gender distribution was balanced. Nevertheless, Democratic Communication is a concept that school leaders and educational systems should be aware of in light of the potential for associations with job satisfaction, commitment and occupational stress.

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