

**The Influence of Social Support on Wellbeing:  
Experiences of Primary School Principals  
and the Role of Upward Support**

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### **Abstract**

The wellbeing and workload of school principals has been an issue of escalating prominence both in Australia and internationally. Recent data in relation to principal stress, health and burnout, and the adverse consequences this has for schooling systems, demonstrates that this is an area needing attention. This qualitative study investigated the social support New South Wales primary school principals receive and how this may influence their wellbeing. Given that social support has demonstrated positive effects on wellbeing in general, but that limited research has been completed in regard to how principals experience social support from their staff, this study sought to explore upward support as a means to improve principal wellbeing. Eight primary school principals participated in semi-structured interviews to examine their experiences of this phenomenon. The themes that emerged from the interview data centred on motivation; wellbeing; and experiences and impacts of support. The findings suggest that social support can promote wellbeing and highlight concerns of principals; barriers to principals receiving support from their staff; and the type of support principals require to improve their wellbeing. The implications of these findings for practice are discussed.

**Declaration of Candidate**

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled ‘The Influence of Social Support on Wellbeing: Experiences of Primary School Principals and the Role of Upward Support’ has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. This thesis is an original piece of work and to the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself. The research presented in this thesis was approved by the Macquarie University Ethics Committee (Reference No.: 5201831473520 – *Appendix C*).

Amber Gorrell

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**The Influence of Social Support on Wellbeing:  
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and the Role of Upward Support**

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

This study seeks to explore the issue of principal wellbeing in terms of how the current situation may be improved, given a context of wellbeing concerns for principals that has been widely recognised in recent times. Accordingly, the aim of this research is to provide an insight into the type of support principals require and receive. The study has a particular focus on social support for principals from their staff, termed upward support. In exploring this area, relevant theories based on social support research are applied.

Using a phenomenological design, the study examines the views and experiences of eight New South Wales (NSW) primary school principals through data collected from semi-structured interviews. By understanding how the principals in this study experience social support, and how the amount and type of this support they receive influences their wellbeing; it is hoped that this research may contribute to resolving principal wellbeing issues more broadly.

**1.1 The Changing Nature of the Principal Role**

For several decades, there has been a general trend towards decentralisation of authority and responsibility from the system level to schools (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013; McGrath-Champ et al., 2019), resulting in principals holding increased responsibility for management and administrative tasks that were once the domain of system-level leadership. This is particularly so in regard to staffing and budget areas (McGrath-Champ et al., 2019). In Australia, this



decentralisation has intensified in the past decade, with reforms focused on devolving control and responsibility to schools (McGrath-Champ et al., 2019), such as ‘Local Schools, Local Decisions’ (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2013) introduced in the NSW public education sector.

Simultaneously, there has been a movement to centralise standards and accountability requirements (Fullan, 2014; Keddle & Holloway, 2019; Peters, 2008; Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008), particularly in regard to curriculum and assessment (McGrath-Champ et al., 2019). An emphasis on “outcomes as measured by tests” (McCulla, Dinham, Brock & Scott, 2015, p. 8) has increased pressure on school leaders to contribute to education reform and improve outcomes for students (Fullan, 2014; Macpherson, 2009). More diverse student populations and demands for schools to adopt research-based approaches to teaching and learning have compelled schools to undergo significant change. School leaders must manage these processes of change, intensifying the workload connected to their role (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013; Pont et al., 2008). Principals need knowledge and skills to work with data, allocate funding and engage with the wider community (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2015). The ubiquity of information and communication technology has also impacted on the principal role, creating a feeling for principals that they are constantly ‘on call’ (Pollock, 2016).

This juxtaposition of devolved responsibility with centralised accountability has created “tensions between autonomy and compliance” (Keddle & Holloway, 2019, p. 11). The nature of the principal role has not simply changed, it has also expanded (McGrath-Champ, et al., 2019). The current Australian Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL, 2015) acknowledges the principal role as a challenging one, and states the need for principals to be “committed to their

own ongoing professional development and personal health and wellbeing in order to manage the complexity of the role and the range of learning capabilities and actions required” (p. 16). It is within this context that issues in regard to principal wellbeing and support are considered.

## **1.2 Principal Wellbeing**

Over the last decade, the wellbeing and workload of school principals has been an issue of escalating prominence across many schooling sectors both in Australia and internationally. Riley’s (2019) Australian longitudinal study, conducted from 2011-2018 thus far, has revealed specific issues surrounding the topic of principal wellbeing. Despite having many predictive attributes for high scores on health and wellbeing, collectively principals score below the general population average, with the self-rated health of principals remaining below the overall population throughout the period of the study. Measures for burnout, stress, sleeping troubles and depressive symptoms are 1.6, 1.7, 2.2 and 1.3 times higher respectively for principals than for the general population. In comparison to the broader population, principals were found to experience a far higher prevalence of offensive behaviour at work and higher levels of job demands, emotional demands and emotional labour. Additionally, there is an increasing trend in stress caused by mental health issues of students and staff.

Within the data for Australian principals, primary school principals in the government sector have the lowest measures of self-rated health and the lowest level of job satisfaction in comparison to their secondary counterparts and primary principals in other sectors (Riley, 2017a). On a state by state comparison, NSW principals collectively (government, independent and Catholic sector data combined) report higher levels on the aforementioned negative measures of wellbeing (Riley, 2017a).

The issue of principal wellbeing is not isolated to Australia, with these ominous statistics being mirrored internationally. More than half of primary school principals in Ireland report they have a work-related health issue (Irish Primary Principals' Network, 2014), whilst in Ontario, Canada, changes to principals' work have increased job complexity, and subsequently stress levels (Pollock, 2016). A survey of 500 principals in the United States of America found their job satisfaction had decreased nine percentage points in less than five years, with 75 per cent feeling the job has become too complex (De Jong, Grundmeyer & Yankey, 2017). Likewise, in Sweden principals have reported that their area of responsibility is too wide (Tornsen, 2010) and statistics for negative measures of wellbeing show principals in New Zealand also experience these at higher levels than the general population (Riley, 2017b).

The two greatest sources of stress cited by Australian principals over the course of Riley's (2019) study have been the sheer quantity of work and a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning, with both of these sources displaying an upward trend since 2015, indicative of the changing nature of the role. The hours worked by principals are reflective of the trend in quantity of work, with more than half of the study participants working upwards of 56 hours per week and almost a quarter working between 61 to 65 hours. Many principals feel that their current workload is unreasonable, reporting that they are unable to complete the full range of work expected of them (Deloitte, 2017).

Some employers have acknowledged concerns with principal wellbeing and are implementing strategies designed to facilitate principals having more time to focus on teaching and learning. In the NSW government schooling sector specifically, for example, the introduction of the 'School Leadership Strategy' in 2017 affirmed the importance of the principal in relation to student results and, consequently, support to enable principals to be instructional leaders

(McGrath-Champ et al., 2019; NSW Department of Education, 2017). Aspects of this strategy included reducing the ratio of Directors of Educational Leadership to Principals from approximately 1:34 to 1:20. By supervising fewer schools, those in the Director role can feasibly provide more practical support to principals. It also included the provision of a small amount of flexible funding within each school's budget from 2018 onwards to provide support with administrative tasks. This funding has been allocated based on the size of the student population, meaning principals in smaller schools who might be either performing a dual leadership and teaching role, or who are the only non-teaching member of staff with no off-class executive support, are receiving the least funding.

Whilst these strategies demonstrate an acknowledgement of some of the issues surrounding the principal role, the statistics related to principal wellbeing remaining at such alarming levels over an extended period (Riley, 2014, 2019) demonstrate that any substantial solution to the wellbeing crisis is not yet apparent. Thus, consideration of this background information underscores the need to explore this area further and investigate previous research through a review of existing literature, which is presented in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The purpose of this literature review is to examine research of relevance in regard to the principal role and how support is experienced within this role. It will firstly consider the significance of principal wellbeing for the broader schooling system; in the context of implications it may hold for educational outcomes for students. Next, it will focus on social support, exploring research in this area and applying this theoretical framework to the issue of principal support. Support that moves up the hierarchy in a workplace will then be specifically addressed. This support from staff to principal has been termed ‘upward support’ (De Nobile, 2012). ‘Upward support’ is contrasted with support that is provided to staff supervised, termed ‘downward support’, or colleagues at the same level, termed ‘horizontal support’. Finally, the relevance of trust to social support, within the overall culture of a school, will be considered. The limitations of the existing research that emerge from this analysis support a need for further research in this area, leading to the research question of the present study.

### **2.1 Principals: Impacts, Expectations and the Future of the Role**

School principals have a significant impact on educational outcomes for students (Hattie, 2012; Helal & Collelli, 2016) and, within each school, contribute to improved student learning by enhancing instruction (Dempster, Alen & Gatehouse, 2009) through “shaping the conditions and climate in which teaching and learning occur” (Pont et al., 2008, p. 19). The principal holds great power in creating an environment and structures that can improve teacher work. Arguably, when the leader is not functioning well, the whole school suffers (Beausaert, Froehlich, Devos, & Riley, 2016; De Jong et al., 2017). Hence, the implications of principal wellbeing extend to schooling systems as a whole rather than only individuals within leadership roles.

There is wide recognition that to have favourable impacts on student outcomes and influence organisational performance positively, principals need to focus on instructional leadership to build staff capacity (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2015) and not “spend all their energies on administration” (Ridden & De Nobile, 2012, p. 7). A core practice of the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL, 2015) is leading teaching and learning, where “principals have a key responsibility for developing a culture of effective teaching” (p. 15). It would seem that creating such a culture will necessitate building connections with staff. Relationships among adults in schools have long been seen as the basis that sustains all other attempts at school improvement (Barth, 1991). Recent evidence suggests schools where the instructional focus is collective are demonstrating improvement in student achievement (Sirchia Huguet, 2017), with shared responsibility and accountability stemming from teachers collaborating on leadership activities (Nordengren, 2012). However, shifts in school policy can be viewed as having an impact on the relationships principals have with their teaching staff, as principals are managing staff in a context where the school leader is increasingly being held accountable for effective school performance (McGrath-Champ et al., 2019).

The requirement for principals to focus their work on instruction is apparent, with benefits for student outcomes if they do so. Thus, it is of concern that, in considering whether the conditions exist in schools for principals to enact instructional leadership in practice, there is much to suggest this is not the case. It would seem that principals know what they should be doing to enable the greatest impact for students but there are barriers to them achieving this. School principals have been challenged to balance competing objectives (Boies & Fiset, 2018) and must aspire to the ideal of instructional leadership whilst continuing their historical role as managers of the school, supervising the physical aspects of the school site (Sirchia Huguet, 2017). There is an expectation that principals can fulfil the dual functions of instructional leader and efficient

manager, at a time when an increase in managerial tasks is commonplace in contemporary schools (LaPointe Terosky, 2016).

Recent figures demonstrate the percentage of instructional work undertaken by school leaders is minimal (Murphy, Neumerski, Goldring, Grissom & Porter, 2015) and principals report they spend an average of only an eighth of their time on instruction-related activities (Grissom, Loeb & Master, 2013), with a higher proportion of their time devoted to management than leadership (Deloitte, 2017). Seventy-nine per cent of Australian principals report that a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning is a source of stress for them (Riley, 2019). Principals experience multiple interruptions during the school day and have no clear boundaries around their work efforts (Deloitte, 2017), meaning it may be difficult to complete instructional leadership tasks that will inevitably require sustained focus. Even where research identified principals who were successfully prioritising instructional leadership during the school day, this was achieved by devoting after school hours and weekends to undertaking managerial tasks and other activities that required extended periods of concentration (LaPointe Terosky, 2016).

Additionally, recruitment, succession and assuring a supply of applicants for principal positions are already causes of concern (McCulla & Degenhardt, 2016) and the number of aspiring principals in Australia is not substantial (Rodgers, 2018). Potential applicants are deterred by the workload (Pont et al., 2008), with principal supply affected by “wide-scale inability to achieve work-life balance” (Crozier-Durham, 2013, p. 2). Support from one’s principal has also been shown to play a large role in teachers transitioning to leadership roles (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2015; McCulla & Degenhardt, 2016) but with existing principals experiencing wellbeing issues at considerable rates, their persuasion of others to undertake the role may be reduced. Worryingly, at the same time that the principal role is perceived by many

as unappealing, there is an imminent need to attract candidates in a number of schooling systems. In the NSW government schooling sector, 63 per cent of principals are aged 50 years or more (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2015). This ageing leadership workforce, coupled with the possibility of higher levels of attrition given the current statistics on principal wellbeing, means enticing new candidates to the role, as well as taking steps to retain existing principals, will be a necessity.

Accordingly, investigating the area of principal support as a means to improve wellbeing and to increase the level of instructional leadership undertaken would appear to be of immediate and critical concern. This may ensure the viability and effectiveness of the position into the future and, consequently, the continued development of educational outcomes for students.

## **2.2 Social Support**

Social support has received substantial attention in the fields of social and behavioural sciences. The positive impacts of interpersonal relationships were first noted over a century ago when it was observed that social isolation led to a higher risk of suicide (Lepore, 2012). In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the scientific study of wellbeing and positive aspects of mental health (Feeney & Collins, 2015) and a large body of empirical work supports the view that people who are more socially integrated and who experience more supportive and rewarding relationships with others have better mental health (for example: Cohen, 2004; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Whilst social support is multifaceted (Cutrona & Russell, 1990), it has a central tenet of functioning to protect people from the inimical effects of stressors (Lepore, 2012). Examining research in this area is therefore relevant to the topic of principal wellbeing.



In the context of the present study, social support can be defined as resources from the social environment that have a beneficial influence on psychological or physical health (Lepore, 2012). Since the 1970s, research has explored the antecedents and consequences of stress and burnout (Beausaert et al., 2016), with much evidence presented throughout the period since to indicate social support can be a buffer to stress and contribute to overall job satisfaction (Chaplain, 2001; Duchame & Martin, 2000; Hulbert, 1991; Tomic & Tomic, 2008). It has also been shown that ‘daily hassles’ may be a more efficient predictor of psychological ill health than major life events (Chaplain, 2001), suggesting the importance of timely and accessible social support. Social support networks can be characterised by the mutual exchange of support (Hite, Williams & Baugh, 2005) and in school settings, relationships have been shown to be a powerful mediator of teacher stress, with teachers being more resilient when they feel valued and appreciated (Margolis & Nagel, 2006).

The purpose of social support has for some decades been generally classified as emotional, informational, instrumental or appraisal (Glanz, Rimer & Viswanath, 2008; Greenglass, 1993), with these categories still applied in much current research on social support. Thus, these classifications provide an appropriate structure with which to consider social support in school settings. Within these settings, emotional support may be received as empathy or trust; informational support provides data to assist in coping with a situation; instrumental support is focused on behaviour, such as assisting with a task; and appraisal support is evaluative in nature and may include constructive feedback or performance evaluations (N.T. Greene, 2016).

Social support within the workplace and its effects in strengthening wellbeing have been explored in a number of studies in recent years and there is much evidence that it can promote wellbeing. Tai (2012) found that leader and team social support moderate the relationship

between team stressors and team performance. Shen's (2008) study considered social support in primary and high school settings and support was shown to predict certain types of coping strategies. Similarly, Ju, Lan, Li, Feng and You's (2015) study of middle school teachers found that workplace social support was negatively associated with teachers' burnout. Chi, Yeh and Wu's (2014) research showed social support positively affected wellbeing and teaching effectiveness, finding that the more social support teachers received, the better their wellbeing, which in turn influenced their teaching effectiveness. Wolgast and Fischer (2017) also focused on instructional quality and found that it could be improved through collegial support, particularly where teachers were supporting each other in achieving a common goal. They also found that this collegial support resulted in the teachers experiencing reduced stress.

Interestingly, in examining teacher stress and social support usage, Ferguson, Mang and Frost (2017) found that teachers who experienced increased workload stress were more likely to access social support; although males reported lower frequency of contacts with social supports when feeling stressed than females. This study also found that teachers who believed there was no stigma about teacher stress were more likely to access social support. Thus, whilst it is possible the relationship between social support and stress may not be entirely linear, overall it would certainly appear that social support can play a significant role in buffering stress.

It has often been the case, though, as with the studies discussed, that where social support has been considered in relation to school settings, it has had a focus on either downward or horizontal support. This focus perhaps also explains the tendency of research to concentrate on teaching staff rather than principals specifically. In the context of schools as bounded locations, downward or horizontal support can only be received by principals from supervisors and principal colleagues respectively, who are located at different sites, rather than at the workplace

of the principal. Because of this, and the fact that whilst both teachers and principals work in the same high-demand, dynamic environment, they deal with quite different responsibilities and tasks (Beausaert et al., 2016), caution needs to be exercised in assuming these results would generalise to principals.

### **2.3 Social Support for Principals**

Overall there is a paucity of empirical research focused on the social support principals receive, and particularly so in regard to upward support, that is support from their staff, and the impact this may have. However, where principals have been the focus of research, there are findings indicative of likely positive impacts.

In terms of downward support, Wong and Cheuk's (2005) study considered the relationship between job-related stress and social support in principals, focusing on support principals received from supervisors. They found that emotional support from one's supervisor had an impact in reducing the adverse effects of stress. The study completed by Beausaert et al. (2016) is noteworthy in that it looked more broadly at support principals receive from various sources, with a focus on downward, horizontal and upward support. However, the support from staff within the school was grouped with support from principal colleagues outside the school, meaning it is difficult to identify the exact level of support the staff within the school provided. This study did highlight the role of social support in dealing with the daily burden of work and possibly preventing burnout. Its finding that support from colleagues within and outside the workplace had the greatest influence on buffering stress, in comparison to support from supervisors or broader community support, is of particular interest because it demonstrates the value upward support may hold for wellbeing. Likewise, N.T. Greene's (2016) study of loneliness and perceived social support for principals is pertinent, in that isolation has been

shown to be a predictor of burnout (De Jong et al., 2017; Tomic & Tomic, 2008; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). N.T. Greene (2016) found that perceived social support was associated with lower levels of loneliness, identifying perceived support from teachers, or upward support, as being a stronger predictor than perceived support from either supervisors or other principals. These results suggest it would be worthwhile to explore the effects of social support from staff on other aspects of principal wellbeing.

Thus, from the little research that has been completed, there is some evidence for a premise that upward social support may positively influence the wellbeing of principals. However, there are also indications principals may not be receiving the support they need from staff within their schools. De Nobile (2013a) investigated how supportive communication is experienced within schools, finding that upward supportive communication, that is communication that flows from lower to higher in the hierarchy, occurs at considerably lower rates in comparison to downward or horizontal supportive communication. The implication is that principals do not receive as much support from their staff as the staff receive from them, or as the staff receive from one another. Openness of communication has been associated with staff morale (De Nobile, 2012), job satisfaction and organisational commitment (De Nobile, 2007; De Nobile & McCormick, 2008) and can affect self-esteem and motivation (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). Hence, the fact that principals would appear to be receiving limited supportive communication from other staff within their workplace is possibly contributing to their wellbeing concerns.

If the extent to which primary school principals experience upward support is generally low, it may be this form of social support on which there would need to be an emphasis to address the apparent concerns with principal wellbeing. De Nobile's (2013a) work affirms this notion, as he found that, whilst principals did not receive considerable upward supportive communication,

when it was received it was deemed by them as valuable, and viewed as a possible contributor to morale and satisfaction. However, as the participants in this study were largely teachers reporting on supportive communication from their perspectives, the extent of principal perspectives was limited. As De Nobile (2013a) noted, interactions involving upward supportive communication may often occur one to one between a principal and staff member. This means they may not be accurately reported when contingent on the observations of other staff members. Accordingly, further investigation of upward support from principals' perspectives, such is the focus of the present study, appears of value.

#### **2.4 The Relationship of Social Support to Trust**

School climate and school culture both relate to a shared understanding of organisational context, with climate focused on perceptions the members of an organisation have regarding practices and culture concentrated on why these practices occur (Ostroff, Kinicki & Muhammad, 2013). These distinct yet overlapping concepts of school culture and climate both include trust as a key component (Hoy & Miskel, 2008, McGrath-Champ, et al., 2019) and any investigation of social support will necessitate that consideration also be given to the level of trust that exists within the school overall, as the two are known to be associated (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Principals have previously acknowledged the importance of school climate as a condition for upward support, with levels of openness and trust and the quality of relationships viewed as important aspects contributing to this climate (DeNobile, 2013a, 2013b). The relationship of trust to social support is particularly relevant in conditions of autonomy, as this may further challenge the development of trusting and collaborative professional cultures. Situating decisions about staff appointment, retention and discipline locally rather than centrally can alter the relationship between principals and teachers (McGrath-Champ et al., 2019).

The study by Tasdan and Yalcin (2010) is of note in its exploration of the relationship between social support and organisational trust, whereby a positive correlation between the two was found. Whilst the focus here was on teachers rather than principals, essentially where teachers perceived that they received social support from their superiors, colleagues and parents of students, their trust in people was also higher. Fink's (2016, p. 29) 'Trust / Distrust Matrix' offers a framework by which to assess how trust may impact experiences of social support. Here, a high trust / low distrust combination would be the ideal, seeming to create the best conditions for social support to occur. However, this would likely only be obtained in a workplace through "repeated interactions over time between trustor and trustee" (Fink, 2016, p. 30), which may have implications in terms of the level of social support principals receive being somewhat dependent on the time they have been in the role.

Trust has been identified as a significant variable determining how principals enact their leadership (Day et al., 2011). Riley's (2019) research assessed social capital, comprising measures of vertical trust (trust in management), horizontal trust (trust in the social community at work) and justice (whether workers are treated fairly). Quite a disparity between schools was discovered, yet this did not have any correlation with the socio-economic area of the schools nor the proximity of the schools to a capital city. However, it was associated with increased perceptions of job satisfaction and general health, affirming the importance of trust to wellbeing. This is particularly pertinent when coupled with the results of another recent study, where principal responses revealed that more than 40 per cent do not feel trusted within their schools and the majority cited principal peer colleagues as the group they trusted most, as opposed to staff or supervisors (Marks & McCulla, 2016).

It is of interest to also consider the relationship of trust with middle leadership. Research (Harris et al., 2019) suggests that those in middle leadership roles often feel a tension between expectations from their principal and the need to develop professional collegiality within their teams. This may mean that there are barriers to those in middle leadership roles readily offering social support towards the principal. Thus, the experiences of principals with only middle leaders in their executive teams (i.e. assistant principals), may be different from those who also have one or more senior leaders (i.e. deputy principals). Attaining an increased understanding of these issues from the viewpoint of principals may further efforts to identify the support principals receive.

## **2.5 Summary and Research Question**

This chapter has shown that social support offers promise in terms of addressing the concerns surrounding principal wellbeing. In demonstrating benefits for morale and job satisfaction, as well as the possibility of buffering stress, depression and burnout, the results from much research on social support provide endorsement that this is a means to improve wellbeing.

In examining the existing literature surrounding the topic of upward social support for principals, three key conclusions are evident. The first conclusion is that there is limited research focused on the role of social support in relation to principals generally, and particularly in terms of upward support provided to principals from their staff. The second conclusion is that, whilst statistics on principal wellbeing have been collected and analysed, and demonstrate a major concern in this area, there is little research on how this situation can be improved. The final conclusion is that, from the existing empirical research on social support, albeit limited in relation to principals specifically, there is an indication that upward social support could hold benefits for principal wellbeing.

These conclusions collectively indicate that exploring the phenomenon of upward support in relation to principals is an area worthy of enquiry, with possible beneficial impacts for both principal wellbeing and student outcomes. This is acutely so in that currently it would seem upward support is not being received by principals to the extent that may be desirable or helpful. It is hoped that further research focused specifically on principals will help explicate this issue, detailing the prevalence and effects of upward support. This exploration of the experiences principals have with social support from their staff is proposed to add to an understanding of this phenomenon, and possibly result in information as to how it could be encouraged within school settings.

### **2.5.1 Research Question**

What are primary school principals' experiences of upward support and how might this influence their wellbeing?

Research Sub-Questions:

1. What are the concerns of primary school principals in relation to their wellbeing?
2. From whom do primary school principals receive social support?
3. What level and type of social support do primary school principals receive from the staff within their own school?
4. What impact do primary school principals identify this level and type of social support as having on their wellbeing?
5. Is there a difference in the way upward support is experienced by primary school principals with no off-class executive staff in comparison with primary school principals who have at least one off-class executive staff member?



The following chapter will detail the methodological approach this study took in investigating these research questions.

### **Chapter 3: Method**

This chapter details the design of the research, including information in regard to the research participants, research instrument and the procedure for data collection. It addresses ethical considerations and explains the techniques used for data analysis. The fact that the study was completed as ‘insider-research’ and the implications of this for the methodology are also discussed.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The aim of the research, in seeking to understand the experiences of primary school principals in relation to upward support, necessitated a flexible, qualitative approach. The qualitative design is appropriate because the study examines features of the social world (Bergin, 2018) with an aim of producing a detailed description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As this research was undertaken with an assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and was focused on the perspectives of the participants (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012), it employed a phenomenological methodology (King & Hugh-Jones, 2019) using in-depth individual interview methods. The phenomenological method commences with the experience but then engages with the process and descriptions thereof (Roth, 2009). This approach is considered suited to studying affective human experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and is concerned with the first-person conscious experience (King & Hugh-Jones, 2019). Thus, the phenomenon of interest was primary school principals’ “lived experiences” (Klenke, 2016, p. 208) of upward support, with the research design facilitating a depiction of the fundamental nature of these experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The collection of data was focused on gaining full and rich description (King & Hugh-Jones, 2019), hence individual interviews were utilised. In-depth interviews are a primary data collection method for phenomenological research (Johnson & Christensen, 2012), enabling the study of the experiences these principals had with the area of interest (Patton, 2015) and consideration of “multiple examples ... and finding what experiences the different people have in common” (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 385). In-person interviews were conducted as these are viewed as having advantages over telephone interviews in regard to contextual naturalness that leads to more open expression and greater effectiveness with complex issues (Shuy, 2003).

### **3.2 Research Participants**

The target population was defined as principals working in the public primary school system, administered by the NSW state government, who had at least two years of experience in a substantive principal role and whose current school was located in metropolitan Sydney. The decision to focus specifically on NSW Department of Education primary principals was based on the most current data available prior to conducting the research. This data demonstrated that for Australian principals, primary school principals in the government sector reported the lowest measures of self-rated health and the highest measures of depressive symptoms, burnout, stress and sleeping troubles, as well as the lowest level of job satisfaction in comparison to their secondary counterparts and primary school principals in other sectors (Riley, 2017a). Thus, given the focus of the research on the influence of social support on wellbeing, this presented as an appropriate population to study.

It was deemed that a sample size of eight would be suitable given the idiographic nature of the research (Robinson, 2014). All eight participants were principals employed by the NSW

Department of Education who worked in schools in metropolitan Sydney. The participants ranged in age from 37 – 54 years and had between two and seven years of experience in a substantive principal role. Four of the participants worked in schools where there were no other off-class executive staff members (school size fewer than 500 students) and the other four worked in schools where there was at least one other off-class executive staff member (school size greater than 500 students). This related to the research sub-question focused on whether there is a difference in the way upward support is experienced by principals with no off-class executive staff in comparison with principals who have at least one off-class executive staff member. Half of the participants were male and half were female, with both males and females represented within each of the categories of having and not having off-class executive. This gender balance was considered important due to the finding within a recent study (Ferguson et al., 2017) of males reporting lower frequency of contacts with social supports when feeling stressed than females.

Due to the need for the participants to meet the specific criteria appropriate to the research sub-questions and to ensure they were representative of the target population, they were selected through “purposive sampling” (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 231). Hence, the characteristics of interest were defined and individuals located who met these characteristics. Purposive sampling is appropriate in relation to this study, which is aimed at insight about a phenomenon (Patton, 2015), thus the need for sampling in a strategic manner relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2012). The eight participants were recruited through an invitation email (*see Appendix B*) and all agreed to be involved. This means of sampling also ensured that the two groups of participants selected for the criterion of school size were similar in regard to other aspects, such as gender and years of experience. This meant a comparison could be made between these groups with greater confidence.

### 3.3 Interview Methods

As the study commenced with a clear focus on areas of interest (Bryman, 2012), semi-structured interviews were used over unstructured interviews. This ensured the same general areas were covered with each participant, whilst allowing for discussion of emerging matters that highly structured interviews may not have enabled (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The main interview questions were aligned with the research sub-questions. These questions were designed to elicit detailed descriptions of support the participants receive in their principal role. As a phenomenological interview, the questions were generally open-ended, inviting participants to provide personal descriptions of lived experiences (Patton, 2015). Table 1 details the interview questions and the purpose of each. *Appendix A: Interview Guide* provides full detail as to the interview structure.

**Table 1. Interview Questions and their Purpose**

<b>Interview Question</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
What has been your experience in the principal role in regard to both positive and negative aspects?	This initial question enabled each participant to “chronicle their history with the phenomenon of interest ... (to lay) the foundation for questions that access each participant’s perceptions (and) emotions” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 125). It also captured the concerns of the participants in regard to wellbeing, as well as what motivates them in their roles.
Do you receive support within your role? If so, from where or whom do you receive this?	This question provided an overview of what sources were prominent in participants’ minds when they considered support and whether staff was a source they volunteered when asked this more generalised question.
How would you describe the support you receive from your staff?	This question focused specifically on the level and type of support participants received from staff.
What kinds of support do you receive from your staff that you feel are beneficial?	This question concentrated more explicitly on what support participants determined to be positive such that the analysis could consider whether specific types of support were of greater value than others.
How do you feel when you receive these types of support from your staff?	This question addressed the impact receiving support from their staff had for the participants, focusing on the emotions it resulted in for them, linking to their wellbeing.
Do you feel that your staff has a clear understanding of the work tasks you perform within your role? Why / why not?	This question determined whether participants perceived that their staff understood aspects of the principal role and asked them to explain their response. This was included as a means to consider whether the level of staff understanding of the principal role influenced the support they provided.
Can you identify anything your staff could do that would increase the positive impact on your wellbeing?	This question focused on revealing the type of support that the participants would find most beneficial in influencing their wellbeing, even if this type of support was not currently being received.
Can you identify anything you do that you feel encourages support for you from your staff?	This question provided information about strategies that participants may employ to prioritise their own wellbeing and that of their staff members through whole-school or system programs, reciprocal support or other means.
Is there anything else you would like to add in relation to this topic?	This final question provided an opportunity for participants to include any points they felt were relevant, either that had been elucidated by the interview questions or that they felt were topic-related but had not been explicitly asked.

### **3.3.1 Pilot Interview**

In refining the Interview Guide (*see Appendix A*), a pilot interview was conducted with a colleague who had experience in the principal role. This colleague was not one of the study participants and was selected due to their experience working across a variety of roles within a primary school setting and their expertise in designing and implementing staff wellbeing initiatives. They were provided with some background information about the study aims, such that they could consider this in providing feedback about the interview. The pilot used the main interview questions as well as some prompts and probing questions.

Debriefing with the pilot interviewee provided an opportunity to consider how they had interpreted the main questions and whether the probing questions had assisted them in focusing their responses. This was beneficial in enabling feedback about the question wording as well as providing an opportunity to refine the interview technique (Bergin, 2018), and determine the likely overall timing of the interview. The debriefing and reflection from the pilot interview led to some additions and amendments to the prompts and probing questions to increase the likelihood that participant responses would align with the research questions. It also led to the inclusion of the phrase ‘in regard to both positive and negative aspects’ within the first interview question as feedback was that without this phrase, the question was interpreted as meaning the years and schools of experience, rather than experiences within the role.

## **3.4 Procedure**

Interviews were conducted on the school premises of each participant, at a time convenient to them within the data collection period of November 2018. The average duration of each

interview was 28 minutes. With the permission of each participant, an audio recording of the interview was made. Each participant had signed a consent form prior to the interview commencing and they were reminded that they would not be identified individually once the recording commenced. The same general questions were asked of all participants, with various probing questions included when appropriate. At the conclusion of each interview debriefing was conducted, with the participants reminded of complimentary counselling services accessible through the NSW Department of Education if the interview had triggered a need for support. The visits concluded with a general conversation between interviewer and interviewee and, in most cases, a tour of the school premises led by the participant. These invitations for a tour demonstrated the participants' investment in the project, possibly resulting from the opportunity to express their feelings and thoughts at length, in their own words (Brydon-Miller & Tolman, 2001).

All interview audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher, to promote "intimate familiarity with ... (the) data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 132). Multiple checks were conducted to ensure accuracy. These checks involved listening to the recordings with the verbatim transcripts for equivalence and considering the vocal tone of responses, with notes made in regard to the latter as appropriate. Participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcript to retain and each participant also had an opportunity to confirm its correctness, in line with the recommendations of Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Poland (2003).

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

Procedures of The Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee and the State Education Research Applications Process (SERAP) were followed in designing the research, with both of these bodies granting permission for the research to be conducted (*see Appendices*



*C and D*). The study abided by the regulations of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007). The participants were provided with information regarding the purpose and procedure of the study as part of being invited to participate and prior to giving written consent. As part of providing consent, participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time and that if they did proceed with an interview, they were free to decline to answer any of the questions. All data was retained in password protected files.

### **3.6 Insider-Research and Methodological Considerations**

The present study was conducted as what can be termed ‘insider-research’. The amount of insider-research has increased in recent years, with much of this happening within the field of education (M.J. Greene, 2014). Generally, insider-researchers are those who chose to study a group to which they belong (Breen, 2007), that is, populations of which they are also members (Kanuha, 2000). In the present study, both the participants and the researcher held the role of primary school principal, with the fact that the researcher held a dual role as a principal and a researcher disclosed in the recruitment invitation and consent form, such that all participants were aware of this prior to agreeing to be involved. Whilst the researcher had the same employer, namely The NSW Department of Education, and held the same job position as the participants, the researcher and participants did not work at the same workplace nor did they have a social relationship.

Key advantages of being an insider-researcher evident in the present study included having a greater understanding of the group’s culture and the likelihood of more natural interactions with the group members (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). The pre-existing knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field (Chavez, 2008) that the researcher had likely enabled a level of

trust and openness in participants that may not have been present otherwise (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). It was also likely beneficial with recruitment and rapport (Blythe, Wikles, Jackson & Halcomb, 2013). The interview interactions may have been more natural (M.J. Greene, 2014), with the participants likely welcoming the opportunity to discuss issues with someone who understands (Bell, 2005).

There are also methodological and ethical concerns that may be more apparent with insider-research than outsider-research (Breen, 2007) and awareness of these contributed to the design and methodology employed for the present study. Reflexivity, or keen and astute self-awareness (Patton, 2015, p. 70), was a particularly crucial aspect of the research design. The systematic keeping of memos and the maintenance of a reflexive journal as part of these memos, as suggested by Frost and Bailey-Rodriguez (2019) and Gay et al. (2012), was used to assist with the research process. This allowed regular opportunities to consider how the researcher's own views and experiences impacted upon the research.

“Establishing and maintaining an appropriate degree of both social and emotional distance” (M.J. Greene, 2014, p. 9) is also an important part of the reflexive process. Ensuring the researcher's own emotions or experiences with the phenomenon under investigation did not unduly influence the data collection or analysis was a consideration. Accordingly, prior to the interviews being conducted, the researcher explored experiences with the phenomenon of interest in order to be more aware of personal viewpoints and assumptions, to create awareness of these and set them aside or ‘bracket’ them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). This awareness of personal assumptions became a key aspect of the reflexive journal also, facilitating consideration that the data analysis not be improperly affected by such assumptions. In all interview-respondent interactions, “both parties bring biases, predispositions, attitudes and

physical characteristics that affect the interactions and the data elicited” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 130) and the insider-researcher must be particularly aware of not projecting their views onto participants, as well as taking steps to ensure this does not affect the data analysis (M.J. Greene, 2014).

Having the research supervisor and researcher identify initial themes within one of the transcripts independently provided a means to consider whether bias had been avoided in the analysis. Additionally, employing a theoretical framework based on social support research for the interpretation of findings aided in triangulation (M.J. Greene, 2014).

Overall, whilst it was crucial to be cognisant of the possible impacts of being an insider, it is also true that being an outsider “does not create immunity to the influence of personal perspective” (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 59). As Breen (2007) argues, it may be simplistic to think of the insider / outsider role as a dichotomy. In fact, it may be best conceptualised as a continuum. Being a member of a population does not denote complete sameness within that group, nor does not being a member denote complete difference (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This seems true of the present study, where the researcher and participants shared an identity, language and experiential base (Asselin, 2003) to some extent but the perspective of the researcher was also shaped by their position as a researcher, meaning it is arguable whether it is ever possible to fully occupy the position of insider or outsider (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

### **3.7 Analytical Strategy**

The analysis of data took an exploratory and inductive approach, with a log maintained throughout each step of the process. This ‘memoing’ (Gay et al., 2012; Johnson & Christensen,

2012) recorded insights gained from the data and served as a basis for reflection (Bryman, 2012).

Initially, each interview transcript was read holistically several times. This process may be referred to as ‘horizontalization’, where all pieces of data were treated as having equal weight initially (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27) and specific statements from the transcripts that provided information about participants’ lived experiences were identified (Klenke, 2016). Identifying these significant statements that had particular relevance (Johnson & Christensen, 2012) drew upon memoing completed during the readings of the transcripts. These memos were combined with those made immediately following each interview in regard to prominent areas discussed, and those made during the transcribing process.

The core meanings established through the content analysis were then categorised using open coding, creating codes by defining what emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Annotation and category construction techniques suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) were employed, with a focus on fairly and adequately representing the raw data to ensure that no important themes were overlooked (Bergin, 2018). Emergent themes and sub-themes were organised into data tables, with transcript statements, and annotations regarding the content of the statement and its relationship to the theme and sub-theme included.

As mentioned, and suggested by Bergin (2018), the researcher and the research supervisor both independently undertook an initial identification of themes and sub-themes within a transcript. These analyses were compared, which also supported triangulation. Whilst a very high degree of similarity was obtained, some minor modifications were made as a result of this process. With the resulting themes and sub-themes then used to continue the data analysis, an analysis using NVivo 12, which is software that has been “popularly applied within the context of the social

sciences” (Sotiradou, Brouwers & Le, 2014), was employed with one transcript as a benchmarking exercise, to further test the relevance of the themes and the level with which each sub-theme was discrete. Where overlap between sub-themes was identified, sub-themes were combined, and in some cases re-named. It has been suggested that, particularly for novice researchers, a combination of automatic and manual text analysis may be best (Sotiradou et al., 2014). This enables experimentation with different codes and testing of hypotheses that software such as NVivo affords, whilst maintaining the connectivity with the data that is inherent to manual analysis.

Once data from all transcripts was classified within the confirmed themes and sub-themes, each transcript was read holistically again to search for nonredundant units of meaning (Klenke, 2016) and to reflect further on the categorisation of statements. A cross-analysis of all transcripts identified similarities and differences between the data for each participant, with tallies of the frequency of each sub-theme and aspects within it. The final themes and sub-themes applied to the analysis are detailed in the next chapter which presents the findings of the study.

## Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the analysis of data collected from the interviews. The main themes from the analysis are identified. Within the respective themes, key sub-themes are explored in relation to each research sub-question. These sub-themes provide the basis for detailed description of the experiences of the participants.

### 4.1 Overview

Through the content analysis and coding of interview data, five main themes emerged. The themes were designated as **Wellbeing; Motivation; Support; Staff; and Impact**. Each participant was asked nine focus questions, as detailed in *Appendix A: Interview Guide*, with varying probing questions, as appropriate for each interview. The interview transcripts were divided into statements, with each consisting of a phrase, sentence or multiple sentences that related to one distinct point the participants made. A total of 354 statements were obtained from the interviews and classified within the themes that emerged. Table 2 details the number of statements grouped within each theme and how these themes related to the research sub-questions. The final themes and the associated sub-themes applied to the analysis are presented in Table 3.

**Table 2. Main themes and their relationship to Research Sub-Questions**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of Statements</b>	<b>Research Sub-Question/s</b>
Wellbeing	106	What are the concerns of primary school principals in relation to their wellbeing?
Motivation	14	
Support	126	From whom do primary school principals receive social support?  What level and type of support do primary school principals receive from the staff within their own school?
Leadership	88	What level and type of support do primary school principals receive from the staff within their own school?  Is there a difference in the way upward support is experienced by primary school principals with no off-class executive staff in comparison with primary school principals who have at least one off-class executive staff member?
Impact	20	What impact do primary school principals identify this level and type of social support as having on their wellbeing?

**Table 3. Final Themes and sub-themes Applied to Analysis**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Wellbeing	Managing people
	Responsibility
	Stress
	Negative effects on wellbeing
	Isolation
	Staff wellbeing
Motivation	Students
	Teaching & Learning
Support	Staff
	System – General
	Principal Colleagues
	System – Supervisor
	Family
	Community
Leadership	Strategies
	Culture
	Staff perception
	Executive staff structure
	Vision
Impact	Type of support
	Benefits



In detailing the findings from the data, statements from the participants are included and, where this is the case, they are quoted verbatim. Where multiple statements are included in illustrating a sentiment expressed by the participants, each is sourced from a different participant in order to demonstrate the commonalities or differences between the views expressed. The statements are de-identified in order to protect the anonymity of the participants. Because the participants have often referred to specific circumstances of their school settings, supervisors and staff, it was deemed that the use of pseudonyms would still allow for the possibility of identification when the statements included from each participant were taken as a whole, therefore this was avoided.

The findings are reported under each of the five research sub-questions, using the sub-themes from the analysis. The presentation of the findings under each research sub-question commences with a frequency table that details the number of interview statements related to each sub-theme and the percentage of overall statements within the theme that this number represents.

Explanations of each sub-theme are also provided within the relevant sections.

#### 4.2 Research Sub-Question 1: What are the concerns of primary school principals in relation to their wellbeing?

**Table 4. Frequencies of sub-themes for Wellbeing**

Sub-theme	n	%
Managing people	34	32.08
Responsibility	28	26.42
Stress	20	18.87
Negative effects on wellbeing	10	09.43
Isolation	9	08.49
Staff wellbeing	5	04.72

The statements within the overall theme of **Wellbeing** demonstrated key concerns of the participants. They highlighted aspects of the principal role that were challenging and the effects of these on wellbeing.

##### *Sub-theme: Managing people*

Close to one-third of the statements within the overall theme of **Wellbeing** related to the sub-theme of *Managing people*. Statements classified within this sub-theme were those that specifically referenced leading and managing stakeholders. These statements indicated that participants viewed managing people as a significant facet of the principal role towards which they need to devote extensive time and energy. This sentiment is evident in the following examples, the first from a principal in a school with greater than 500 students, and the second and third from principals with fewer than 500 students:

It's hard to get out there all of the time to be around everybody and to be everywhere all of the time.

With some of your APs (*referring to assistant principals*) you're needing to follow them up. This week I need to check if they've done that, if they haven't done that I need to ... which is time consuming.

People is one of the hardest things in the principal role to manage because there's just so many.

All eight participants spoke about the challenges of managing stakeholders who were either not supportive of them or not supportive of each other, or who did not act in a professional manner.

Indicative statements were:

I've had a lot of challenges initially when I came to the school in terms of staff cohesiveness and bringing everyone together.

Some staff test the boundaries more than others and the staff need to know that you will be fearless in actually addressing all issues.

One of the things we do very well in our role is we understand we have a professional obligation to conduct ourselves a certain way but parents don't have a professional obligation to do the same ... in an ideal world it shouldn't be the principal's role to resolve a dispute between two grown adults.

I have a bit of a tricky exec. (*referring to executive team*), I have two that [sic] don't get on.

It's just so hard to get people to change.

Two participants, both from schools with greater than 500 students, spoke specifically about the idea of an open-door policy and that, whilst they wanted to be available when needed, it meant a lot of their time was taken up by meeting with stakeholders:

I guess from the word go I've always been that person who says 'Yeah come on in' whenever anyone comes to the door ... and that I suppose isn't necessarily the best way to go because you find that then everything else gets pushed back.

Some people have the open-door policy and I do .... maybe that's, the saying I used 'I made my bed and I've got to sleep in it'.

Several participants also mentioned the difficulty of managing stakeholders who present with mental health issues. These comments from principals of both larger and smaller schools illustrated the challenge this presents:

Two of my executives I know have mental health issues at different times and it's that sort of fine line of where they're sitting, you know, that then makes it harder because I think I need to take that on because they're not coping at the moment.

Conflict with parents who are escalated, who feel like the school's wronged them in some way or their child in some way and it becomes heated and things like that. People where probably mental health is an issue as well.

So you've got to show, especially if some of your staff aren't feeling the best, if they're emotionally not well, their wellbeing, you've got to look after that. You've got to show the strength that you are on top of things all the time.

Overall, it is evident that managing people is a challenging aspect of the principal role with emotional demands. The time needed for principals to build effective relationships with all stakeholders is also apparent.

#### *Sub-theme: Responsibility*

The sub-theme of *Responsibility* related to the level, diversity or amount of workload the participants perceived themselves as having. Many of the participants noted that the principal role involves a considerable workload and a high level of responsibility:

I think part of the problem that we have at the moment is that there is a huge workload and responsibility in what we are expected to do.

It would be great to have probably not as much thrown at us.

The difficulties in being a principal is [sic] the amount of responsibility we have ... I left here about 7 o'clock on Sunday night and I'd been here for eight hours.

Three participants, two from larger schools and one from a smaller school, spoke specifically about competing priorities and that the principal role involves dealing with many unexpected events, meaning there was little opportunity to complete tasks as planned:

Something's bound to pop up and suddenly throw your day into chaos.

Every day is different, you can come in with what you think you can try and achieve in a day and not one thing is even looked at.

How often is your day interrupted? Highjacked by other things. It's regular.

More than half of the participants also mentioned a feeling of pressure to perform and to make significant decisions within the role. Illustrative comments included:

There is a pressure I suppose to perform.

That's the pressure of, you know, you want to be part of the community and be here when things are on.

Everyone else is looking at you to make the decisions.

In the tough decisions I have to stand by them.

There is an element of frustration apparent in the statements within this sub-theme. Clearly, there is a tension between tasks that need to be completed and tasks that emerge unexpectedly and it is possible that a feeling of lack of achievement of planned tasks could cause frustration. There is also a sense that the level of responsibility means work tasks encroach on other aspects of life.

*Sub-theme: Stress*

Five of the participants specifically noted that the principal role is a stressful one, with several stating the level of responsibility they have contributes to this. Indicative statements in regard to stress included:

You are worrying at two o'clock in the morning I wish I had the time to put into this improvement plan or whatever ... the buck's stopping with you and there's a certain level of stress that comes with that.

That sort of ultimate decision making I find it stressful.

You've got to show the strength that you are on top of things all the time. Which I mean, is probably pretty hard for us sometimes ... there's a lot of stress in that.

I used to get anxious like I'd go to bed and read them (*referring to work emails*) ... and it would stress me.

On a certain day your stress levels can be fine and you can manage them like anything but on other days things get to you.

The stress noted by the principals appears to relate to their previous points in regard to the workload they have, where competing priorities mean planned tasks are not achieved and this results in stress. This feeling of stress would also appear to be present at times outside of work hours, with anxiety felt about tasks or matters associated with the principal role.

*Sub-theme: Negative effects on wellbeing*

In addition to statements specifically about stress, several participants referenced other negative impacts on wellbeing, either in regard to themselves or principal colleagues:

What I really struggle with is social media and that they can put whatever they want on social media and we have no right of reply... I actually think we'll see a rise in mental health issues in principals and suicides will come into play.

I know of colleagues that it really takes its toll on being personally attacked.

I do regularly think 'Should I still be a principal?'

These comments suggest for some principals, wellbeing concerns are reaching a critical level.

They also point to possibilities of attrition and lack of appeal for the principal role, which emphasises the issues with recruitment and succession.

#### *Sub-theme: Isolation*

Half of the participants, two from larger schools and two from smaller schools, specifically mentioned that the principal role can create feelings of isolation and loneliness:

I think this can be a very isolating role in the principal's role. There are certainly lots of things where I just have to deal with them.

The negatives are of course sometimes you feel a bit isolated.

I feel lonely sometimes.

If you keep a distance (*referring to from staff*) then you're more isolated ... we're humans, with emotions. Sometimes I think that's forgotten around principals.

The isolation apparent in the principal role points to a need for greater social support, as it would seem if this was being experienced at an adequate level these feelings may not be as evident.

#### *Sub-theme: Staff wellbeing*

Five of the participants also mentioned the feeling of responsibility they had for staff wellbeing overall. The comments suggested they viewed this as important, with some statements also demonstrating this feeling of responsibility could mean participants were often focused more on the wellbeing of their staff than their own wellbeing:

Probably the most important thing is the wellbeing of our staff and that really sets the tone for the school.

It's about protecting the teachers and their mental health.

So, the biggest thing for me is my staff wellbeing, so for me it's making sure they're okay more than the other way around.

So, I guess I'm more about helping others than myself ... I just think that that's my job. I'm there to support others.

I got a sense that the staff as a whole held me accountable for their wellbeing.

These statements may reflect why downward support is more prevalent than upward support, as principals feel it is part of their role to support their staff, and possibly staff also expect the principal to provide this support. However, staff members do not necessarily have the same sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of the principal.

**Table 5. Frequencies of sub-themes for Motivation**

Sub-theme	n	%
Students	10	71.43
Teaching and Learning	4	28.57

When asked what their experiences of being in the principal role have been, with an invitation to discuss both positive and negative aspects, all participants identified some favourable facets and these 14 statements were classified under the theme of **Motivation**. This theme related to statements about what inspires and enthuses participants in their role. Whilst not strictly addressing the research sub-questions, this data was considered relevant in relation to Research Sub-Question 1 as it demonstrates that, despite the range of concerns the participants expressed in regard to their wellbeing, there are reasons why they remain motivated about their role.



*Sub-theme: Students*

The majority of the statements within the theme of **Motivation** related to students, which six of the eight participants specifically discussed as being what made their role rewarding and gave them a purpose. The following quotes from three participants were typical of this sentiment:

The positive is still being able to make a difference to students because first and foremost I'm a teacher gone into a leadership position.

Certainly, very rewarding when you're working with, particularly the kids.

It's a fantastic role and for me most of that comes from assisting people ... whether it's looking at students who we've been able to give an extra-curricular opportunity to or we've done some innovative thing with teaching and learning that's really piqued their interest and they're engaged and they come to school happy.

*Sub-theme: Teaching and Learning*

Half of the participants also emphasised that they view teaching and learning as a critical focus of their role and that having an impact on student outcomes enthuses them. Indicative statements in this area included these from three of the participants:

The most important thing in the school is that all kids are doing their best learning.

And we want them to do well (*referring to students*) and that's what we're all here for.

The real job of leading a school, the teaching and learning side of things.

Overall, the motivation principals have for the role appears to relate to their original position as teachers, in that it is centred on students and improvement to teaching and learning. It also suggests a conflict between what they would like to focus their time and attention on and the many other aspects of the role.

### 4.3 Research Sub-Question 2: From whom do primary principals receive social support?

**Table 6. Frequencies of sub-themes for Support**

Sub-theme	n	%
Staff	59	46.83
System - General	25	19.84
Principal Colleagues	20	15.87
System - Supervisor	17	13.49
Family	4	03.17
Community	1	00.79

Six sources of support were mentioned by the participants and these sources were designated as the sub-themes for the overall theme of **Support**. The sub-theme of *Staff*, which was the most prominent in terms of frequency of responses, is discussed separately in addressing Research Sub-Question 3, which relates specifically to the type and level of support principals receive from staff within their own school setting.

It is important to note in regard to the frequency table that not all comments regarding these sources of support were positive and this will be explored further within the presentation of each sub-theme. Thus, the purpose of the frequency table is to illustrate what participants focused on when questioned as to whether they receive support and, if so, from whom.

#### *Sub-theme: System – General*

Responses classified under the sub-theme of *System – General* were those where participants referred to support from their employer, other than from their direct supervisor. The NSW Department of Education is a department of the government of the state of NSW, Australia, responsible for the delivery and coordination of early childhood, primary, secondary and

vocational education in that state. It is the employer of all staff who work in NSW public schools.

All participants spoke about general system support and the majority of statements in relation to this source noted issues in regard to how this support is received. The issues concerned matters such as support being difficult to access, support not being timely, and support being limited or inconsistent. Statements from five participants that were indicative of these concerns included:

I think our system is quite big and sometimes it takes a long time to navigate where the best support can come from.

They're not always particularly timely which can be of the essence sometimes.

Support could probably come from the Department more. I don't view that systemic support is 100% there at the moment for us, for all principals.

Other sources of support do come from the Operational Directorate or Student Services. I think it's limited, however, particularly when we have challenging students presenting with behaviours that are sometimes extreme.

I find the support we get when new things are rolled out, which is regularly, is very haphazard.

Several participants also expressed concerns regarding a lack of specific training provided to support performance of the principal role. These concerns were demonstrated by statements such as:

You don't get trained as a principal for all those things. I mean our core business is teaching and learning and we know that really well but that's not the main part of our day.

It's been a lot of self-taught.

This is another thing, implement it, without giving you really a great guideline of how to do that or the staffing, the training.

Two participants, one from a larger school and one from a smaller school, referenced funding from the NSW Department of Education as a form of support, in the sense that it can be used to release staff from teaching duties to assist with administrative duties:

I don't think how they fund is equitable at all.

The principal money (*referring to newly-introduced principal support funding*) that the big schools get the most and the little schools get the least is ridiculous. It should be the other way around.

This suggests system support is somewhat lacking, which means the completion of many tasks associated with the principal role has an added element of difficulty. There is a sense that principals need to spend time attempting to understand procedures independently, which also contributes to the level of workload.

#### *Sub-theme: Principal Colleagues*

All participants made comments in relation to support from principal colleagues and these were overwhelmingly positive. Many statements suggested this form of support is accessed for guidance within the role. Comments indicating the sentiments expressed by the participants in relation to this source of support included:

The support of local colleagues is really good. That's probably one of the biggest supports really on reflection.

I have found it good to sound board off other principals.

I have a good relationship with a few principal colleagues who we just at times, we talk about different things that happen in our schools and little ways we can help each other out.

There's a lot of expertise in principalship that I rely on.

Whilst all participants stated that they had received support from this source, two participants specifically noted it was important to find like-minded principals for this type of support. Others emphasised the importance of networks or Communities of Schools being established to support principals having opportunities to interact regularly and establish relationships. Indicative statements in this regard were:

We've got a really good community of schools here and I can ring up a number of principals if I need to about certain things, you know, and get advice.

I really like our networking breakfasts ... just sort of a chat is really good.

It's also having your own support of the principals around you and knowing who you can call.

*Sub-theme: System – Supervisor*

Each principal within the NSW Department of Education reports directly to a Director of Educational Leadership. The Director of Educational Leadership oversees a network of schools in a geographical area, of which there are 110 in total in NSW. The Director of Educational Leadership provides line management support to principals, with a focus on managing high-level contentious issues and ensuring evidence-based decision making to increase student achievement. The Directors of Educational Leadership supervise the principals within their network, as well as report to the Executive Director of School Performance.

All participants discussed support from this source, although comments were varied. However, with a recent restructure within the Department of Education resulting in a reduction in the number of principals supervised by each Director of Educational Leadership, it was noteworthy that a number of participants commented that they were receiving increased support from this source. This seemed particularly applicable for the principals who had experienced a change of

Director of Educational Leadership within the restructure. Comments from four participants were indicative of this change noted in the level of support:

Now we've got a fairly good relationship that I can just call her about anything.

We've had a new Director start this year who has been far more supportive.

I've noticed it (*referring to support*) increase with this new round of Directors and what their roles are, which is really good.

If you call her, she'll be here or will listen.

However, statements from other participants suggested that whilst support was received from this source, it was not always adequate, whilst another participant noted they do not tend to source support from their supervisor at all. Participants noted issues such as those demonstrated by the following statements:

They probably don't get back to us as quickly as they should.

I think it's quite hard for them to offer support when they're everywhere, like they're so far spread.

Well initially I didn't really receive any support and I was always too nervous to ring.

#### *Sub-theme: Family*

The statements within this sub-theme suggested family members are valued by principals in terms of opportunities to debrief. This was particularly the case where participants had family members who also had experience working in a school context. Two participants where this applied noted:

I can ring her (*referring to a family member*) and talk about things and she has a general understanding of things that are going on.

There's a lot of informal support. Just from family. Teaching is a thing in my family line.

Whereas a participant where this did not apply stated:

Some things are just out of context and don't make sense to other people unless they're in that role.

*Sub-theme: Community*

Only one participant commented in relation to community support, noting that the community had been:

Quite supportive ... a very good P & C (*referring to Parents' and Citizens' Association*) executive this year who've really taken on roles and are very supportive and we work together which is great.

#### 4.4 Research Sub-Question 3: What level and type of social support do primary school principals receive from the staff within their own school?

**Table 7. Frequencies of sub-themes for Leadership**

<b>Sub-theme</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Strategies	29	32.95
Culture	21	23.86
Staff perception	19	21.59
Executive staff structure	12	13.64
Vision	7	07.95

The sub-theme of *Staff* within the overall theme of **Support**, as well as the sub-themes of *Strategies*, *Culture*, *Staff perception* and *Vision* within the overall theme of **Leadership**, were analysed in relation to Research Sub-Question 3. These sub-themes collectively encompass the statements participants made in regard to how support is experienced from staff within their own school settings; strategies the principals use to encourage support; the level of understanding they feel their staff members have of the principal role; and how the overall school vision and culture may influence support. The sub-theme of *Executive staff structure* is presented separately in relation to Research Sub-Question 5.

##### *Sub-theme: Staff*

The sub-theme of *Staff* consisted of statements participants made in regard to how they experience support from their staff. The responses from all participants demonstrated that they receive a greater level of support from the staff members they work more closely with, namely their administrative and executive staff. Statements illustrating this aspect included:

I think absolutely my admin. staff and my executive staff I receive a lot more support from them than anybody else within the school.



My biggest support in the school setting is my SAM (*referring to School Administrative Manager*).

Particularly my Admin, like they totally have my back.

The executive team are [sic] very cohesive.

It's the Deputies that I've worked with who after a difficult day will intentionally make sure that we debrief.

She is great, my DP (*referring to Deputy Principal*). We have a lot of conversations where I know it's just between her and I [sic]. We bounce a lot of ideas off each other.

In regard to their staff generally, a number of the participants from both larger and smaller schools did not feel that support they offered staff was necessarily reciprocated:

I think in my role it's still perceived that I'm there to look after all of the staff, they're not there to look after me.

I don't have a staff member here that [sic] I would talk to about confidential things to do with the school at all.

I do a lot but it's interesting that it's not reciprocated ... I don't expect anything back but it's quite interesting, I don't get anything back.

So, I think some of them probably feel they could do a better job, I don't know that they know how to do a better job in supporting.

Three participants specifically noted the importance of building relationships with all staff in order to encourage support:

You want good relationships with your teachers and you want to make sure they're supportive of what you're trying to do within the school.

I like that support that they feel like they can trust me.

Loyalty and not micro-managing is [sic] how I've found that staff have been further supportive to me.

However, two other participants, one from a larger school and one from a smaller school, referred to the difficulty of building close relationships due to the boss and employee dynamic:

The difficulty around that in the principal role is that it's perceived as not being allowed ... the next thing that occurs is that 'You've got favourites' and ... the perception is they get preferential treatment with different things.

As a leader you still sort of think, don't give too much away ... you've got to have that front of you know, I'm the leader.

Overall, statements demonstrated that upward support from staff is not occurring at the same level as downward support from the principals and that, where upward support does occur, it tends to come from staff in specific roles. There is also a sense that building close relationships with all staff is complex and perhaps presents a barrier to receiving upward support. This would appear to link to the sense of isolation the principals expressed.

#### *Sub-theme: Strategies*

The sub-theme of *Strategies* relates to statements about programs or approaches that participants used to prioritise wellbeing and encourage the staff to do the same, including supporting each other and possibly also the principal. Comments relating to a whole-school focus, illustrating the range of approaches, were:

The wellbeing team within the school not only supports me but also supports the staff as a whole ... we've organised people to come out and speak to the staff ... one of the staff members has organised yoga for the staff.

We've started wellbeing week once a term ... so we have no staff meetings before or after school ... we work out where we can give them all some extra RFF (*referring to release from face-to-face teaching*).

Morning teas, things like that, we might have a staff meeting where we'd go down to the local café.

Staff can come up and take him for a walk if they've had a bad session (*referring to therapy dog*).

A few participants also spoke about more individual strategies that they employ to enhance their wellbeing:

I find that doing mindfulness really helps me in my job .... I turn my phone off so I do not check emails on the weekends at all.

I like things lighthearted and that keeps me sane.

I do keep a folder ... of ... I guess, affirmation.

This sub-theme demonstrates that wellbeing is acknowledged by these principals as important and they are keen to promote it as a priority for all staff.

#### *Sub-theme: Culture*

The sub-theme of Culture included statements about the culture or climate of the school. Some of these statements suggested principals feel they can influence and change the culture of their school. Statements indicative of this were:

I think as a principal you do have the power to set up the culture within your school and to set up the systems that allow people to feel ... empowered, I suppose, to have their say but also be respected.

My goal is also to be inclusive ... so engaging the SAM (*referring to School Administrative Manager*), the SAOs (*referring to School Administrative Officers*), the GA (*referring to General Assistant*) who add input to the whole school, and the SLSOs (*referring to School Learning Support Officers*) ... it's not just focused on teaching service so inclusiveness.

Principals are well aware that they have a role to play in creating an environment that's supportive and collegial and where help is available readily.

I do like as principal coming in and working out what the community wants and where they need to go and then help them shift.

However, a number of participants also acknowledged that changing school culture takes time and effort and is not an easy undertaking:

Change can happen but it's a slow process.

And I moved the school over three or four years towards heightened responsibility at an individual level for students.

I've been here nearly 6 ½ years and it's a huge change to what it was when I started and I look at that and go, we've come a long way. Yes, we've still got ways to go but we are achieving a lot more now.

I think over a five year period now I'm starting to see some of the differences in terms of culture and some of the plans that you've put into place when you first start you really only see some of the fruits of all that labour when you actually get down to this part, this way down into the track.

Different staff, different culture.

That's taken a lot of building because it wasn't like that when I first started and I had to work hard at it.

There is a sense from these principals that they wish to create a positive culture within their schools where all staff feel valued. They acknowledged that people are integral to the school culture and that a sustained effort is required to embed change.

#### *Sub-theme: Staff perception*

Participants commented about how they felt their staff perceived their role. All but one of the participants felt their staff did not have a clear understanding of the principal role and what it entails, resulting in possible unrealistic expectations from their staff. The lack of understanding of the principal role may mean staff are not aware of the support the principal requires, or are unsure what support would be valuable to offer. The exception to this was where a teaching principal felt working in a small school setting had enabled their staff to understand the tasks the

principal performed to a greater extent. Comments indicative of this general lack of understanding of the role included:

I don't think people understand ... the hours and hours that goes [sic] into that sort of thing, the big picture sort of stuff that needs to happen within a school ... people don't understand ... the number of tasks that you might do.

I don't think they understand the role of principal. I don't think they understand all that encompasses.

Staff walk around the school, they observe, but they don't know the full picture of leading and managing a school.

Until you've walked in someone else's shoes you really don't know the ins and outs of what's going on.

As a whole no I don't think they understand the complexities at all.

In the case of the small school principal, the following statement illustrated the contrast mentioned above:

I had no executive staff, so ... we all worked together ... they knew a bit more about what goes on in a school. Of what a principal does at a school.

Interestingly, this principal also noted that they felt more support from the staff as a whole as a result of the increased knowledge their staff had of the principal role. In addition to the majority of participants feeling that their staff did not fully understand their role, two also referenced a perception from their staff that aspects of it are not appealing, meaning many staff would not aspire to be in the role:

You get a lot of people who say 'I'm glad you're the principal and I don't have to do that'.

Most people say to me on a fairly regular basis 'I wouldn't want your job'.

*Sub-theme: Vision*

Half of the participants specifically referenced the school vision or purpose, with collaborating with staff to form the vision and gain support for the direction of the school evident in these illustrative statements:

Being able to collaborate on a vision and see it realised and really have that input and that follow through.

Having a good vision is important too that everyone comes along with.

The idea of a school plan has worked for us because everyone knows the vision, everyone knows our three strategic directions, the way we are going for students, teachers and community.

And we've worked quite hard I think on trying to break down those barriers of, you know, well that's the executive role or that's the principal's role and it's just we're all working on this together and we're all working for one purpose so let's just all work together on that one purpose and let's support each other.

This sub-theme also links to aspects of managing people as it involves tasks surrounding increasing the motivation of stakeholders to work towards common goals. It is also possible creating opportunities to collaborate with staff on leadership tasks may, to some degree, be able to mitigate the isolation these principals expressed feeling at times.

#### 4.5 Research Sub-Question 4: What impact do primary school principals identify this level and type of social support as having on their wellbeing?

**Table 8. Frequencies of sub-themes for Impact**

Sub-theme	n	%
Type of support	11	55.00
Benefits	9	45.00

This research sub-question considered what effects the participants experienced when they did receive support from their staff, and what type of support was most beneficial.

##### *Sub-theme: Type of support*

In their statements, participants identified the type of support that staff do engage in or could provide that is most beneficial for them. Instrumental support, or support in completing tasks, was the most popular response, with all eight participants viewing this as beneficial. Participants felt that if they could rely on other staff members to complete a duty effectively and efficiently with minimal management required, it had a positive impact for their own wellbeing. Statements that demonstrated these sentiments included:

I think when that can take something off your plate, that it's actually going to be done by someone else and they're going to follow through and get it done, fantastic.

I guess doing their job without me having to remind them of stuff.

Having staff members take on leadership roles within an area of expertise and run with it is imperative because you can't do everything.

I like how they bring ideas in. So, they're not always relying on the executive to come up with the ideas ... so, I like that they are actually thinking beyond just their own classroom as classroom teacher. I find that supportive.

The thing that could increase my wellbeing the best would be if the things that staff members are responsible for and they got paid for, they did and they did it [sic] well.

Two principals from smaller schools also expressed a desire for emotional support, such as checking in with them, whilst one from a larger school mentioned appraisal support, such as being provided with feedback. The statements related to these types of support were:

I think things like just checking in, like dropping in, like how you're going. I do have one person that [sic] does that.

I think people just doing those simple things of saying thanks for something which I try to model and do.

It is nice to get positive feedback.

#### *Sub-theme: Benefits*

This sub-theme relates to statements by participants that referenced a positive effect on their wellbeing from the support they receive from staff. All statements within this sub-theme indicated that staff support held potential benefits for these principals:

Ah, well it's always good to know that someone understands your perspective of something, they don't have to agree with it, even just to listen and again, the Deputies (*referring to Deputy Principals*) and the SAM (*referring to School Administrative Manager*) would always do that.

It's like, I didn't feel as alone ... having those people just checking in with you, you feel like there are people around.

It certainly helps my wellbeing because I know that I've got people there supporting me.

It makes it less stressful.

These statements demonstrate the importance of upward support in having an impact on wellbeing and providing a buffer to feelings of stress and isolation.



**4.6 Research Sub-Question 5: Is there a difference in the way upward support is experienced by primary school principals with no off-class executive staff in comparison with primary school principals who have at least one off-class executive staff member?**

*Sub-theme: Executive staff structure*

This sub-theme related to statements that explicitly referenced the executive staff structure. In schools with fewer than 500 students, there is no deputy principal position in the staffing allocation and the executive staff consists only of the principal and, depending on the school size, up to three assistant principals. Schools with greater than 500 students have one deputy principal within the staffing structure, whilst schools with over 700 have two. An assistant principal is lower than a deputy principal in the staffing hierarchy, with the former also counted as a classroom teacher within the allocation of staff. A deputy principal is considered a more administrative-based role. With half of the participants working at schools with no off-class executive (that is, no deputy principal) and the other half with a least one off-class executive staff member, it is of interest to note that participants felt this was a factor affecting the level of support they were likely to receive from their own staff and consequently, the level of responsibility that resided with them. Statements from three of the participants who had no off-class executive indicated their sentiments:

I find in this role here where I am the principal and everyone else is on class, all that decision making ultimately comes down to me.

I think not having a DP (*referring to Deputy Principal*), I really miss that relationship.... It's a lot of pressure on me ... it's like I'm doing a DP job and principal job.

Being in a school under a certain size not having an off-class Deputy I think does hinder your ability to get things done.

Additionally, statements from some of the participants who had at least one off-class executive staff member highlighted the differences they see in working with deputy principals as opposed to assistant principals:

Now that we've grown and now have a Deputy Principal role how that's changed for me, in that everybody used to field everything to me.

The Deputies are there to support me and the Assistant Principals, in a middle management role, are sometimes just that, they're in the middle and they are generally advocates for their teachers.

It's a different role from a DP (*referring to Deputy Principal*) to an AP (*referring to Assistant Principal*).

A clear difference for those principals whose staffing allocation includes one or more deputy principals is evident in relation to workload, pressure and support.

In summary, the findings show that these principals consider that their role involves significant workload and responsibility, with many competing priorities that mean it can be challenging for them to achieve all tasks required. Many of these principals expressed that they can feel isolated in their role and that they experience stress at times in relation to their work. They receive support from various sources, with the support of principal colleagues deemed particularly beneficial. In terms of their own staff, these principals experience most support from their administrative and executive teams, with the principals who work with one or more deputy principals feeling particularly supported by them. When their staff does provide support, there are positive effects for their wellbeing. The findings in relation to all themes will be discussed further in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter provides a discussion of the key findings of the study. This discussion is presented in relation to the main themes of **Wellbeing, Motivation, Support, Impact** and **Leadership** that emerged from the analysis of data detailed in the previous chapter. The alignment of the findings with relevant literature will be explored.

### 5.1 Wellbeing

The magnitude of statements principals made about managing people and the difficulties associated with this indicate that this area greatly contributes to the emotional demands and emotional labour of the role. These emotional demands and labour are known to be experienced by principals at higher levels than the general population (Riley, 2019). Participants noted the time and energy it takes to manage various stakeholders. The principal position is somewhat unusual in this regard as, although there are structures in terms of line managers, a broad range of stakeholders including staff, parents, students and representatives from various Department of Education directorates often hold an expectation of meeting directly with the principal. Participants also referred to the emotional demands of managing conflict between stakeholders, staff performance issues or stakeholders who have mental health issues. Previous research has found that these areas are significant sources of stress (Riley, 2019) and a contributor to job dissatisfaction and attrition (De Jong et al., 2017). Accordingly, it would seem these are important areas to address in considering strategies to alleviate principal wellbeing concerns.

The significant workload, disruptions in trying to achieve planned tasks and pressure are also areas the participants spoke about in terms of their concerns. Their comments suggested this conflicts with a desire to focus on teaching and learning and negatively impacts their ability to

be instructional leaders. During the school day, there seems to be little opportunity for principals to complete tasks that require a sustained focus. This is reinforced by a principal time-use study where Australian principals were observed to complete 45 different activities during school hours on average (Deloitte, 2017). It also corresponds with international research where the two most common themes in regard to potential obstacles to upholding a student-focused mindset were extensive job obligations and lack of time (De Jong et al., 2017) and a study by LaPointe Teroksy (2016) demonstrating that the only means by which principals could prioritise instructional leadership was to use weekend and evening time for the completion of other work tasks, which again would appear to have negative implications for wellbeing. Hence, an emphasis on instructional leadership seems difficult for principals to achieve within their current circumstances.

The concerns around stress, isolation and other potential negative effects raised by the participants have implications for overall wellbeing. The workload and need to make many high-level decisions were noted as being associated with stress. This reflects national data (Riley, 2019) that found the sheer quantity of work is the leading source of stress for Australian principals. The fact that half the participants in the present study mentioned the role as being isolating and lonely, at least at times, is also concerning in regard to wellbeing, with isolation being a predictor of burnout (De Jong et al., 2017; Tomic & Tomic, 2008; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010).

Finally, related to principal wellbeing is the sense of responsibility participants expressed for managing staff wellbeing, with a feeling of accountability for this evident in some of the statements. The principals in this study appeared to prioritise wellbeing in general. Most of them described a range of strategies they had implemented, facilitated or supported in their schools to

buttress the wellbeing of staff and students. Indeed, research shows that positive perceptions of leadership can result in increased teacher job satisfaction and collaboration (DeNobile, 2017; Orphanos & Orr, 2014), meaning principals who have regard for the wellbeing of their staff are likely to see benefits from this. However, the comments from participants in this study suggested it is possible this focus on staff wellbeing may, at least at times, come at the expense of prioritising their own wellbeing.

## **5.2 Motivation**

The findings of this study demonstrate that principals have a high level of intrinsic motivation for their role, and that this motivation largely relates to their desire to see improvements in, and benefits for, their students. This corresponds with Riley's (2019) finding that more than 90 per cent of principals report being passionate about their role, and previous research that a significant reason people gravitate towards the principalship is for the opportunity to make a difference to students (Howley, Adrianairo & Perry, 2005).

A passion for teaching and learning was evident in the comments from principals in this study. This seems logical since their initial training was as teachers, and it is likely that the skills they demonstrated within this role led to promotion opportunities. There is evidence in their statements of a desire to be instructional leaders, as they have highlighted primary concerns with instruction and teaching (LaPointe Terosky, 2016); a focus on having a clear vision for their school (Mulford, 2008); and leading change that results in improvement for students (Hattie, 2012).

## **5.3 Support**

Of the sources of support the participants identified, the support of principal colleagues was prominent in that it was mentioned by all participants and their statements expressed that they

had all found positive effects from this source of support. This reinforces the importance of principal networks and opportunities to debrief with colleagues working in the same role. The vital importance of professional networks of principals has also been promoted in recent research (McGrath-Champ et al., 2019). Support from family was noted as beneficial by the participants who mentioned it, although this appeared particularly valued where there was a family member who also worked in the education sector. This finding is of interest in considering the results of Riley's (2019) study, where 'partner' was ranked overall as the greatest source of support over the 2011-2018 period the study has been conducted. When taken with the statistic that over 40 per cent of respondents to this survey had a partner who works in the education sector, this result and the findings from the present study are of note. They raise conjecture as to whether those principals who have a partner or family member within the education sector tend to rely on them for support more than those who do not.

In terms of system support, the general support provided by the NSW Department of Education was noted as having some deficiencies in regard to locating appropriate support within a large system; timeliness of support; and appropriate training for new initiatives. This finding aligns with other recent research considering Australian principals employed in the government schooling sector where inadequate preparation and professional development provided by their employer were identified as concerns (McGrath-Champ et al., 2019). The support from direct supervisors was noted as having increased by many participants since restructuring of networks led by Directors of Educational Leadership was undertaken. Thus, this initiative appears to have been beneficial and continuing to explore ways for the direct supervisors of principals to provide more extensive support would be worthwhile.

It is of interest that only one participant in the present study mentioned community as a source of support. De Jong et al. (2017) proposed an explanation for strained relationships between parents and principals may relate to increased media attention on topics such as test scores and bullying, with the portrayal of school leaders by the media creating bias against them. This could make forming relationships of mutual support with parents more difficult. It was noted by a participant in the present study that whilst principals must always behave in a professional and courteous manner in interactions with parents, parents do not always do the same.

In regard to upward support, this study found that overall, upward support was not received by principals at the level they required. Many statements principals made showed support was largely received only from specific staff members and overall more support could be offered. This concurs with the findings of De Nobile (2013a), of upward supportive communication occurring at lower levels than downward or horizontal supportive communication, and the findings of De Jong et al. (2017), where a lack of support was identified as a reason for job dissatisfaction. Support from staff was generally received more regularly from specific members of the staff, namely the administrative staff and members of the executive team. In terms of the latter, support from deputy principals was particularly noted where this position was in the school's staffing allocation. This suggests that the more closely a principal works with a staff member, through the nature of their respective roles, the more support they are likely to receive from them.

It is possible that a contributing factor to the low level of upward support is that staff do not have a clear understanding of the principal role. Thus, this lack of understanding is reflected in a lack of empathy towards the principal. Participants in the present study mentioned that staff did not comprehend the number of tasks principals need to complete and the complexities of the

role. Without an appreciation of this, it follows that staff may be less likely to offer support and it may be more difficult for them to provide any form of targeted support.

Another possible contributing factor to low levels of support from staff is the difficulty for principals in forming relationships with them due to their supervisory role. Whilst principals in the present study noted a focus on building relationships with staff and supporting them to encourage reciprocal support, they also noted difficulties in forming the kind of relationships that may result in reciprocal support. The mutual exchange of support that characterises social support networks (Hite et al., 2005) may be easier to achieve in the absence of a hierarchical relationship, without the imbalance in the power dynamic that exists between a boss and employee (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Research by McGrath-Champ et al. (2019) that considered initiatives principals adopt to support school-level working conditions of teachers may also be relevant in terms of obstacles to principals forming relationships that promote reciprocal support. In this case, their findings suggested principals did not have a sense of influence over the local conditions of teachers and proposed this may relate to the expanded nature of the principal role and the framing of teachers as “producers of ever-improving student outcomes” (p. 602) rather than workers.

#### **5.4 Impact**

Whilst there is not extensive empirical research on the effects of social support for principals from their staff, social support is a well-studied domain in general and positive outcomes from social support have been consistently found across studies (for example: Beausaert et al., 2016; Chi et al., 2014; Tai, 2012; Wong & Cheuk, 2005). This meant it was anticipated this would be the case for this study and the statements from principals confirmed this assumption. All participants identified positive effects for their wellbeing on occasions when they felt supported



by staff. Their statements suggested support from staff could be a buffer to stress and reduce feelings of isolation, congruent with the research on social support mentioned.

Of the four key purposes of social support - emotional, informational, instrumental and appraisal (Glanz et al., 2008) - principals identified that instrumental support would be the most beneficial for them. The desire for this type of assistance, consisting of support with the completion of tasks, may relate to the high level of workload principals referred to having, as it seems plausible that within this context principals would be seeking support with the many tasks they are required to perform.

## **5.5 Leadership**

The statements from principals in regard to the executive staff structure of their schools indicated there is a difference in the level of support experienced by principals, dependent on whether an off-class executive staff member is part of their staffing allocation. This correlates with research identifying key obstacles to principals managing their workload that includes an inability to leverage executive staff for planned and ad hoc tasks, and to be a point of triage (Deloitte, 2017). These findings are of interest in relation to the NSW Department of Education's 'School Leadership Strategy' (NSW Department of Education, 2017), where funding linked to this strategy is allocated based on the size of the student population. Whilst all schools have received some additional funding under this strategy, for smaller schools with no deputy principal the amount of funding only allows minimal release from class for an executive staff member. In schools where all executive staff have a teaching load, as with schools that have only assistant principals and no deputy principal, there is limited or irregular availability of executive staff to be a first point of contact. In these cases, the principal becomes the first response to any and all interactions, therefore increasing their workload and the level of

disruption and interruption they experience (Deloitte, 2017). Arguably, the focus of this strategy appears to still centre on the role of principals as “individual actors ... almost solely responsible for student achievement and school success” (McGrath-Champ et al., 2019, p. 594).

There is an obvious disparity in terms of time and availability to offer support in schools having a deputy principal in comparison with those that do not. Aside from this, however, there is another factor that may influence the level of support principals with a deputy principal receive. This is evident in the review of middle leadership conducted by Harris et al. (2019), whereby those in middle leadership roles, such as assistant principals or head teachers, experience a tension between expectations placed on them from above and those from their team; as well as a tension between the line management of colleagues and the need to develop collegiality with them. Hence, their impetus to support the principal is affected.

Regardless of the executive staff structure, the idea of principals being “culture-makers, intentionally or not” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, p. 80) is applicable to the research findings, as the way principals enact their leadership is likely to influence the level of social support occurring within a school. A number of the participants specifically referenced being able to impact the culture of the school, although they also acknowledged that changing or influencing culture is not an easy process. Certainly, the strategies the principals employed to encourage staff wellbeing and the manner in which many of them spoke about their approach to having a shared vision for their school that everyone could embrace and work towards collectively, suggested the promotion of a supportive culture. This is possibly also associated with the concept of leadership with a relational orientation, whereby leadership is inseparable from context and is shaped by interactions (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

The culture within a school and whether this culture encourages social support also relates to the level of trust between stakeholders, as discussed previously. The ideal of high trust / low distrust, as per Fink's (2016, p. 29) 'Trust / Distrust' matrix relies on what is termed "relational trust" (Fink, 2016, p. 17). Relational trust is critical in people-centred organisations such as schools (Marks & McCulla, 2016) and "obliges leaders to be facilitating, empowering and empathetic to maintain and strengthen the connections" (Fink, 2016, p. 18). Relational trust is built over time and the degree to which it exists in a school will determine staff members' willingness to commit time and energy beyond their contractual obligations (Fink, 2016). Possibly, it would also then contribute to the extent to which staff provide social support to their principals, particularly in terms of instrumental support.

In proposing that building trust will be important to increasing social support, though, it is necessary to address how trust may be affected by the reforms referred to in the review of literature that have impacted on the principal role. The 'Local Schools, Local Decisions' reform within the NSW Department of Education (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2013) can be viewed as providing greater autonomy for principals, and the ability to have increased power over funding and staffing decisions could provide an opportunity to impact culture to a greater extent. Conversely, this autonomy could further challenge the development of trusting relationships (McGrath-Champ et al., 2019). Principals can be viewed as mediating agents, where they need to reconcile education reform guidelines and external expectations with teachers' attitudes and needs (Shaked & Schechter, 2017). These 'tight' autonomy structures, where autonomy exists within a framework of compliance with external accountability demands, have been seen to constrain relationships (Moos, Krejsler & Kofod, 2008).

Any attempts to promote principal wellbeing through social support from within the school will ultimately need to give regard to the existing school culture. The culture and the relationships that occur within it would seem critical elements influencing the success of any leadership behaviour. This also aligns with a growing consensus across disciplines of leadership being a collective phenomenon (Nordengren, 2012) where we learn best through collaborative activity that brings diverse experiences and expertise (Woods & Roberts, 2019) and leadership is considered more broadly than hierarchical positions (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Studies of successful principals have demonstrated they understood that they could not succeed in isolation (Garza, Drysdale, Gurr, Jacobson & Merchant, 2014), because achieving success for all students requires a combined approach (Gumus, Sukru Bellibas, Esen & Gumus 2018).

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

In this chapter the implications for practice will be examined, with consideration of the findings of this study and their links to previous research, as discussed in the preceding two chapters. Directions future research in this area may take, based on the findings and limitations of the present study, will also be discussed.

### **6.1 Implications of Findings**

The findings confirmed issues surrounding principal wellbeing, and that upward social support is of benefit in promoting wellbeing. This suggests it is worthwhile to examine first of all how upward support may manifest in different school contexts, and secondly how this support can be increased. With instrumental support identified as being the most beneficial to principals from their staff, some clear implications are evident.

This study found that principals felt that senior executive and administrative staff were their greatest sources of upward support. This has implications in relation to ensuring staffing allocations are adequate in all schools for support to be available to ease the pressure on principals. In NSW Department of Education schools, the allocation of both executive and administrative staff is dependent on student population. Likewise, principal support funding, introduced since 2018 and able to be used to employ additional staff, is based on enrolment numbers. Re-evaluating the funding model for this principal support, to enable smaller schools to have an executive staff member off-class for increased periods, would assist in addressing the disparity in the support principals working in different schools can access. This is particularly relevant since often it is the case that principals who are newer to the role, perhaps augmenting the need for support, are employed in smaller schools. It also follows that having more staff

available for support could assist with the task of managing the stakeholders of the school, which principals identified as being one of the most time-consuming aspects of their role.

The lack of understanding, and consequent lack of empathy, staff members have for the principal role has also been identified as a contributing factor to a lack of support. This may relate to the lack of training and preparation for the role which principals identified. These factors point to the importance of distributed leadership, which has at its core the idea that leadership is not the sole responsibility of one person in a formal role but requires multiple leaders, both formal and informal, spread across the school community (Glenn, 2009; Harris, 2003). The benefits of distributed leadership for principal wellbeing are twofold. Firstly, it develops a succession pathway in which aspiring principals can acquire relevant leadership experience prior to commencing in a substantive position. This means they would enter with a more thorough understanding of the role, which may increase the wellbeing of new principals, as they would be less likely to feel ill-prepared. Secondly, it would potentially increase the understanding staff members have for what the principal role entails. By staff members in positions other than the principal role having experience with higher-level leadership tasks, a broader appreciation of what these tasks involve would be possible. With this increased staff understanding, the feeling of isolation experienced by current principals may also be lessened. Leadership would be a more collaborative undertaking, with staff across the school feeling an accountability for the overall culture and results of the school.

The fact that some schools have high levels of social capital (Riley, 2019), coupled with the evident support that exists between principal colleagues, could facilitate opportunities for principals to share strategies that have led to higher levels of upward support within specific schools. It is critical that principal wellbeing and support are viewed as important topics and this

could be encouraged through the broader employers and through principal professional associations. By promoting dialogue between principals around strategies and programs, information about practices effective in supporting wellbeing can be disseminated and principals will have increased awareness of approaches that may be engaged within their contexts to increase social support.

A final implication relates to the broader system, where the tension between central accountability and local autonomy can prevent ideal conditions to encourage upward support. This highlights the importance of considering the role expectations of principals. To create a culture conducive to principal support, principals need time to focus on building relationships of trust with their staff. This also allows them to be true educational leaders. By reducing the job demands of principals, there would be potential positive effects for principal wellbeing but it would also be advantageous for the overall culture of the school and the wellbeing of all stakeholders within that environment.

## **6.2 Directions for Future Research**

Compared to previous studies, this study provides new data on the issues surrounding the relatively unexplored concept of upward support for principals. However, it has several limitations that mean further research in this area is warranted.

First, the participants were all from school contexts within the same geographical area and within the same schooling sector, as this study was especially concerned with this population. This does mean, though, that the generalisability of the data is limited. Thus, future research could replicate this design using a larger sample size, across different schooling contexts and sectors. This would also enable a comparison between participant groups to determine if

principals in particular sectors or geographical areas were experiencing upward support differently to others, leading to an exploration of why this may be the case.

Turning to the research instrument, the major limitation of the present study relates to its focus on interviews as the sole means of collecting data. Future research could complement interviews with other instruments, such as surveys or direct observations. Including surveys would enable a larger number of participants to be involved without the need to consider the time needed for face-to-face interviews and the travel associated with them (Gay et al., 2012). Direct observations would possibly provide opportunities to learn about experiences people may be unwilling to talk about in an interview (Patton, 2015). Hence, a case study approach with multiple instruments may provide even broader data on principal experiences of upward support.

Further, it is possible that the results of this study are somewhat dependent on the principals' experiences surrounding the particular time of the interview. With an extended research timeline, a longitudinal study could be conducted that was inclusive of repeated interviews with the same school principals, in order to explore how they experience upward social support at different points in time.

Overall, the value of utilising varied instruments or conducting interviews over time would need to be balanced against not adversely affecting recruitment, as a greater commitment of time and effort from participants may not yield the same level of motivation for involvement.

### **6.3 Summary**

In conclusion, the findings of this study build on the limited empirical research available on social support for principals and its effects. The study supports previous findings that principal



wellbeing is an area of concern and that principals may not be receiving the support they require. It also confirms the assumption, based on research in the social support domain, that social support is beneficial for principals. A key contribution of this study is that sharing the themes that emerged provides a greater insight into the manner in which principals experience support, and why upward support for principals may be lacking. In addition, implications for practice have been discussed that may contribute to productive solutions that could increase the support principals receive and alleviate the challenges they face. Enacting solutions to this important issue will likely have positive effects not only for principals, but also for schools and the outcomes of students within these schools.

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**Appendices**

Appendix A	Interview Guide
Appendix B	Invitation email
Appendix C	Ethics Approval Letter
Appendix D	SERAP Approval Letter

*Appendix A: Interview Guide*1. Introduction:

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As you know I would like to talk with you about your experiences as a principal, particularly in relation to the support you receive in your role. As previously detailed, all of your responses are anonymous. With each question, please provide as much detail as you can. You are free not to answer any question if you do not wish to do so. Please also ask for clarification if there is anything of which you are unsure.

2. Question Table:

<b>Research Question: What are primary school principals' experiences of upward support and how might this influence their wellbeing?</b>	<b>Measure: Interview Question/s</b>	<b>Possible probing questions</b>
	1. What has been your experience of being in the principal role in regard to both positive and negative aspects?	Can you detail specifically any positive or negative aspects? Has the role led to any impacts in relation to your health?
	2. Do you receive support within your role? If so, from where or whom do you receive this?	Please list as many sources / people as you wish.
	3. How would you describe the support you receive from your staff?	What kind of support do you receive? Do you receive support from all of your staff, some of them, none of them? Do you feel it is more than enough, about the right amount, not enough?
	4. What kinds of support do you receive from staff that you feel are beneficial?	Are there any specific examples you can recall? Are there any other types of support you can recall? How regularly would you say these types of support might occur?

	5. How do you feel when you receive these types of support from your staff?	If you consider the examples you mentioned, what emotions did you feel at the time this occurred?
	7. Do you feel that your staff has a clear understanding of the work tasks you perform within your role? Why / why not?	Do they know what things you do each day?
	8. Can you identify anything your staff could do that would increase the positive impact on your wellbeing?	Try to be as specific as possible.
	9. Can you identify anything you do that you feel encourages support for you from your staff?	Things you may do that are reciprocated? Any particular systems you have in your school or within the broader organisation?
	10. Is there anything else you would like to add in relation to this topic?	Feel free to share anything else that may be relevant.

### 3. Conclusion:

- Thank participant again for their time
- Remind of Department's Employee Assistance Program

*Appendix B: Invitation email*

Dear Principal,

I am a Master of Research candidate at Macquarie University (Faculty of Human Sciences) and a primary school principal. I am exploring the experiences of primary school principals in relation to support principals receive from their staff members and how this might influence their wellbeing.

The purpose of my study is to further understand the concerns of principals in regard to their wellbeing; to identify the extent to which principals receive support from their staff; and to explore what kind of support they receive.

I have attached a participant information sheet and consent form for this study. This provides further detail regarding the study, the anonymity of responses and the security of data collected. Please read this information and feel free to ask questions about anything you do not understand or would like to know more about.

I have approval from the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project Number: 3147 - Ref. No: 5201831473520) and clearance from the State Education Research Applications Process (Project Number: 2018396) to undertake this study.

I am hoping to engage 6-8 principals, half from schools with no off-class executive and half from schools with at least one off-class executive, to participate in this study. Participation involves being interviewed for the purpose of collecting data.

Educational research is an important resource to our profession. Thank you for your time in considering your involvement. If you would be happy to take part in this research project, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards,

Amber Gorrell

MRes candidate at Macquarie University, MEdLead., BADip.Ed.



Appendices C and D of this thesis have been removed as they may contain sensitive/confidential information