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Context, leadership and school success: Australian suburban, rural and remote cases from the ISSPP

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Context, leadership and school success: Australian suburban, rural and remote cases from the ISSPP

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Manuscripts

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3 **Context, leadership and school success through Australian suburban, rural and remote**
4 **cases from the ISSPP**
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7
8 **Abstract**
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10 **Purpose**

11 **The purpose of the paper is to explore the complex nexus between context, leadership, and**
12 **school success shown in three Australian cases of successful school leadership.**
13

14 **Approach**
15

16 The three cases reported are based on multiple-perspective case studies that have included
17 individual and/or group interviews with school leaders, teachers, student, parents and/or
18 school council members, observation, teacher survey and document analysis. **All cases are**
19 **part of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) and conform to the**
20 **project's research protocols.**
21

22 **Findings**
23

24 Whilst each principal responded to the contexts within and surrounding their schools in
25 unique ways, there were also many similarities, and their work was able to be described using
26 an open systems model of successful school leadership. This model was applied to one school
27 to illustrate the model's veracity, and a variation of the model was shown to illustrate its
28 adaptability to circumstances.
29

30 **Originality/value**
31

32 This paper contributes to the knowledge about how school leaders navigate contextual
33 complexities to create successful and unique schools that meet local needs.
34

35 **Keywords:** successful school leadership; school improvement, school effectiveness,
36 principals, leadership and context, systems thinking.
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Introduction

The purpose of the paper is to explore the complex nexus between context, leadership, and school success shown in three Australian cases of successful school leadership: one suburban Catholic primary school in Melbourne, one rural school in Victoria and one remote school in the Northern Territory. All cases are part of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) which has researched successful leadership across contexts in more 20 countries. After reporting on the school cases, in the discussion we utilise our open systems leadership model to consider the complexity of leading in these three different contexts.

Successful school leadership

The study of successful school leadership has its antecedents in the effective schools movement. Beginning as a response to the *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Coleman *et al.*, 1966) report, the effective schools movement described important correlates of effective schools, with instructional leadership an important development (Author1 and Author5, 2022). The research tended to focus on narrow measures of success related to literacy and numeracy, and at the turn of the millennium researchers began to focus on successful schools with their broader range of student and school outcomes (Day *et al.*, 2000; Mulford *et al.*, 2004; Leithwood and Riehl, 2005; Author 1 and 5, 2022;). Three important research examples are provided of this type of research.

The first is the study by Day *et al.* (2000) who explored the work of 12 effective principals through the conduct of multiple-perspective case studies. They described a values-led, contingency view of leadership that seemed to account for the success of these principals and schools. This study was the precursor to, and inspiration for, the formation of the ISSPP.

The second is a review of research on successful school leadership by Leithwood and Riehl (2005). Their review highlighted that: successful school leadership positively impacts student learning, with this leadership primarily enacted by principals and teachers, but also involving others in the school and school community; there are basic leadership practices consisting of setting direction, developing people and redesigning the organisation; school leaders respond to accountability-oriented policy contexts; and, there are additional practices that help in schools serving diverse populations to promote school quality, equity and social justice. The basic leadership practices were expanded to include a fourth element concerned with improving teaching and learning (Leithwood and Sun, 2012).

The third research example is the formation of the ISSPP. From the initial meeting involving researchers from six countries, in the intervening 25 years it has produced five project books, nine special journal issues and more than 300 chapters and articles reporting on more than 200 case studies from across more than 20 countries (Author 1 and 5, 2022; Day, 2021). Sun *et al.* (2024) reviewed research from 69 publications, reporting on 95 ISSPP case studies conducted in nine countries and concluded that success was complex and best understood across six categories: student academic, personal, and social outcomes; school learning environment and disciplinary climate; instructional (teaching and learning) capacity; parent and community support; school reputation and improvement; and school physical appearance and resources. Their analysis of principal practices conformed largely to the leadership view of Leithwood and colleagues (e.g. Leithwood and Day, 2007; Leithwood and

Riehl, 2005; Leithwood and Sun, 2012) and, whilst there was variation across the countries in the core practices identified, they could be summarised across five domains:

- building shared visions, setting standards, and identifying pathways to improvement
- enhancing collective instructional competencies and capabilities
- building organisational capacities and collaborative cultures
- improving the instructional program
- building the school's capacity to manage change over time

Similarly, whilst there were differences across countries, principal qualities were covered by eight categories: cognitive capacities, interpersonal capabilities, dispositions, skills/capacities, motivation, values/beliefs, emotional understanding/literacy, and social intelligence (these categories are supported by reviews of wider literature such as Leithwood (2023). These findings build upon other project syntheses such as Author1 *et al.* (2006), and Author1 and Day (2014).

Conceptualising successful school leadership

From consideration of 13 previous ISSPP models from research in Australia, Cyprus, Indonesia and Singapore, Author1 *et al.* (2022) developed an open systems model of successful school leadership which is shown in Figure 1 (also see Author 6 *et al.*, 2023). The model supports and builds upon context and leadership models (e.g. Hallinger, 2018), system views of leadership (e.g. Shaked and Schechter, 2016), complexity views (e.g. Morrison, 2010) and ecological systems views (e.g. Barnett, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Diaz-Gibson *et al.*, 2021), and in so doing, connects with the ISSPP's current emphasis on system and complexity analysis (Day, 2021).

Figure 1: An open systems model of successful school leadership

Place Figure 1 here

Theoretically, the model views schools as complex entities within several wider contexts. The systems approach we have adopted depicts schools as a continuous cycle of input-transformation-output with feedback loops that inform each stage of the cycle.

Inputs include the characteristics of the principal (leader or leadership team), staff and family in terms of what they bring to the school – core features, skills, resources, identities and so forth – and the characteristics of the school, such as stage of schooling and system membership. There may be strong connections between these input variables that will impact on the transformational stage, but the model identifies them as independent variables.

Transformation is the most complex and dynamic aspect of the model and includes the processes, interactions and interventions of the principal and other senior, middle and teacher leaders. School leaders focus on building school capacity (personal, professional, organisational and community), setting direction, creating a positive school culture and constructing enabling school structures. They also engage with their constituents and

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3 networks in meaningful ways to leverage support. Educational leadership is defined broadly
4 as all the leaders, at various levels within the school, who work effectively together, use
5 situationally appropriate styles and approaches to influence school capacity, culture and
6 teaching and learning.
7

8 **Outputs** are the student and school outcomes that are affected by the transformation
9 processes. As confirmed throughout the research history of the ISSPP, student outcomes are
10 broadly defined and include traditional, authentic, social, spiritual and lifelong learning. There
11 are also school outcomes such as school reputation, improved resources, enhanced staff skills
12 and community empowerment. As these outcomes can be tangible and intangible, it is not
13 always easy to provide measures of these.
14

15 **Feedback loops are a key feature.** Feedback is the essential process that allows organisations
16 to self-correct and facilitate informed change, and it is a feature of many ecological systems
17 views. In the model, we have identified two feedback loops coming from the outcomes that
18 can inform the inputs and transformation processes.
19

20 **Contexts.** The input-transformation-output cycle is the internal context or environment of
21 the system (school leadership). There are also multiple external contexts that schools and
22 school leaders operate in: political; system, institutional and educational; economic, socio-
23 cultural and technological. The model is an open system because of these. Importantly, unlike
24 the adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's ideas to the ISSPP (Day, 2021), we don't conceive of these
25 contexts as layers, but rather subscribe to the systems view that links multiple parts in a
26 complex web with different parts having differential importance that changes over situations
27 and time. We also don't subscribe to the randomness often evident in complexity views
28 (Morrison, 2010), and favour systems views which emphasise constant movement between
29 whole and part perspectives to understand how organisations work (Shaked and Schechter,
30 2016).
31

32 We use the Figure 1 model to help construct our brief report of the three most recent
33 Australian case studies by reporting on the inputs, transformations and outputs across the
34 cases.
35

36 **Methods**

37 We provide a brief description that works for all three cases, but for the reader that needs
38 more detail, these can be found in the indicated publications. The three schools were selected
39 for their reputation as successful schools through nomination by system leaders, with success
40 confirmed through consideration of national, state and school data and other information
41 such as review reports. All three cases used the current ISSPP research protocols which
42 describe multiple-perspective, mixed method case studies (Day, 2021). This means that there
43 were individual interviews with the principals (three), other senior and middle leaders, the
44 school council chairperson, other governance people (e.g. school council members, system
45 leaders, religious leaders), individual and/or group interviews with teachers, group interviews
46 with parents (two groups), students (two groups), observation of the life of the school,
47 document collection, and a teacher survey (response rates were 60% or greater). Thematic
48 analysis of interviews utilised the interactive reduction/reflection model of Miles *et al.* (2020)
49 to provide depth and breadth, with coding including initial coding, pattern analysis, thematic
50 development, and constant comparison and reflection to ensure develop of themes that were
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3 robust, coherent and representative of, and informative about, the success of the schools.
4 Simple frequency reporting and central tendency analysis was used for analysis of the teacher
5 survey data. Extended engagement, member checking of transcripts, clarifying research bias,
6 peer review/debriefing during the research process, writing of rich descriptions and data
7 triangulation were techniques used that helped to promote trustworthiness. All studies had
8 ethics approval from the university and informed consent was obtained from all study
9 participants. Full details of the study methodologies can be found in the these and other
10 publications related to the cases. To protect participants, pseudonyms are used for schools
11 and participants.
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16 **The Three Cases**

17 Because of space constraints, we don't utilise quotations or describe all findings. We provide
18 enough information to form a narrative for each case within the open systems model
19 elements. The cases are supported by extensive documentation (e.g. doctoral theses,
20 journal/chapter publications) that the interested reader can peruse to find out more
21 information and to confirm the veracity of our commentary.
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26 **Patron Saint Catholic Primary School (PSCPS)**

27 **The first school is a Catholic primary school in Melbourne, led by the principal, Mark.** We
28 have reported comprehensive findings from this case in Author1 et al., (2024) and Author4
29 (2023).
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34 ***Inputs (context)***

35 This is a Catholic system school in outer suburban Melbourne. Established in 2009, the
36 founding principal, Mark, is responsible for implementing system policies, adhering to both
37 federal and state government accountabilities, and for the educational and religious
38 leadership of the school.
39
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41 This new school was purpose built for collaborative learning, with flexible learning spaces
42 accommodating multi-age classes. In 2022, the school population of 455 students consisted
43 of families from cultural backgrounds including Middle Eastern, Asian and European, with 48%
44 of students having a language background other than English. There were 36 teaching staff
45 and 10 non-teaching staff. The teaching staff was predominately made up of early to mid-
46 career teachers who had been at the school between a few months to 12 years.
47
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49 This was Mark's second principalship. As an experienced teacher and leader in Catholic
50 schools, Mark was highly aware of the multi-faith and culturally enriched environment
51 impacting contemporary Catholic schools. Mark had a vision for enhancing Catholic school
52 identity through whole school improvement processes centred on professional learning
53 community (PLC) ideas, and the implementation and development of a Recontextualising
54 Dialogue School (RDS). The RDS school seeks meaning through authentic dialogue with the
55 current context and the Catholic faith tradition, re-interpreting, and re-imagining what it
56 means to be Catholic today.
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3 Mark's clear articulation of his vision for a contemporary Catholic school, his passion for
4 learning, and capacity to empower others, was reflected in the interviews and staff survey,
5 and seen as a catalyst to the development of an RDS school. The vision permeated pedagogy
6 and relationships, and was articulated in the staff interviews as strategic, intentional and
7 purposeful. Mark promoted and participated in professional learning and the staff interviews
8 highlighted the presence of reflective professional enquiry, ensuring a link between theory
9 and practice applied to all learning areas. Mark's educational vision permeated his work and
10 his desire to engage in a broader dialogue about faith with those in and beyond the school.
11 Mark was seen as a person of faith, with parents referring to his weekly newsletter items
12 reflecting on faith understandings. For parents, Mark had developed a clear and purposeful
13 school culture that supported their child's academic, social and spiritual development.
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19 ***Transformation***

20 A key leadership action for Mark from the beginning was the nurturing and development of
21 PLCs as part of creating a contemporary Catholic school. This framed the way in which people
22 interacted in the school, and, as noted by teachers and teacher leaders, it was an intentional
23 and strategic leadership action empowering school community members to embrace shared
24 values and vision for learning and teaching.
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27 Teaching and learning transformations occurred through several initiatives described as
28 spirals of learning, and including development and use of:
29

- 30 • 21st century learning pedagogy and learning spaces
 - 31 • Thinking curriculum
 - 32 • Inquiry learning
 - 33 • Faith and life inquiry
 - 34 • Teacher capacity
 - 35 • Parents as partners in learning
 - 36 • A PLC for all
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41 A culture of respect, trust, openness and hospitality was nurtured through Mark's leadership
42 and engagement with staff. The school community embraced the RDS, and an open
43 hermeneutical approach to learning and teaching was evident. Mark's leadership of the PLC,
44 and commitment to whole-school approaches, supported by both rigorous professional
45 learning opportunities and personal faith reflection, resulted in the ongoing commitment of
46 staff to the RDS. This commitment resulted not only in building teacher capacity, but personal
47 transformation, with staff expressing new understanding about faith and relationships. These
48 personal experiences enabled staff to facilitate dialogue with students, who also expressed
49 insight into the faith beliefs of their peers and in turn new understandings of their own.
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52 Through nurturing a culture of openness and hospitality, the community reached beyond the
53 school and welcomed others. The school community developed a strong relationship with
54 Murrundindi, who is a local Indigenous (Wurundjeri) elder. This relationship taught the
55 community about embracing diversity, vulnerability and engaging in authentic dialogue with
56 others. Through promoting mutual respect, and dialogue with diversity, the school
57 community supported a peaceful and harmonious society for all.
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Outputs (success)

The school was successful in the broadest sense. On national testing of literacy and numeracy performance, students performed at expectation, whilst on broad and rich measures of student learning across literacy, numeracy, curiosity, faith and so forth, the students had outcomes that were often above expectations.

Interviews with teachers, students and parents, indicated that students were well prepared for secondary school and that the secondary schools had high opinions of students in terms of their literacy, numeracy, thinking skills, social skills and readiness for secondary school.

High levels of student engagement and the capacity to actively pursue personal learning goals and inquiries were evident. They were openly engaged in dialogue about faith, where they discovered and expressed new ways to consider world and faith understandings, and this was confirmed through system surveys related to faith development. Parents described students who were 'able to be independent thinkers' and 'treated as if they're quite capable of understanding... complex concepts and terminology'. Student engagement was further affirmed through external review reports: the school was seen as possessing a culture of belonging, which had engaging learning opportunities, and promoted student voice and an interconnection between the Catholic faith and learners as reflective thinkers.

The staff saw themselves as part of a whole school PLC and RDS. Being part of this school not only built teacher professional capacity, but impacted personally, including on faith development. Survey and interview data reflected the impact of the PLC on staff professional learning through high levels of collaborative learning that enhanced capacity and practice.

Bandjina Primary School

The second school is a government primary school in regional Victoria, led by the principal, Robert. We have reported comprehensive findings from this case in Author2 (2024a, b) and Author2 and Author1 (2025).

Inputs (context)

This is a government primary school located in Victoria, approximately 300km from the state's capital city, Melbourne. In 2023, there were 194 students and 16 teachers. Robert, the principal, had 24 years' experience as a teacher and school leader. This was his first principalship and he had been the principal for nine years. Robert had been a local resident all his life. The staff were experienced and committed with most of the 16 teachers employed at the school for over a decade, and only two teachers had been at the school for less than eight years.

Bandjina has an affluent community, with 71% of the students in the middle and top quarters for educational advantage. Because of this advantage, Bandjina did not receive much system equity funding, and this lack of resources was further compounded by the higher cost of having an experienced staff (staffing is funded on average costs and not actual costs). Robert had to be proactive in applying for additional funds as opportunities arose.

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3 The school's environment was characterised by trust, respect and calmness, and Robert's
4 personal characteristics were observed to be a key driver of this. Robert was described by all
5 interviewees as having a calm and measured nature, with six of the seven staff interviewed
6 explaining that this had contributed greatly to the feeling of calmness and order within the
7 school. All interviewees described Robert as approachable and supportive. He was a visible
8 leader, and he explained that before and after school he liked to leave his office and stand
9 near the entry gate so that parents could approach him easily. The two parent groups
10 acknowledged this and commented that Robert's approachable leadership style contributed
11 to their confidence in him being able to support them.
12

13
14 It became apparent that Robert and Bandjina were a harmonious fit for one another. The
15 school community valued the trust, respect, and connectivity that Robert had provided.
16 Robert's personable, approachable, supportive, and calm nature meant that he was able to
17 fill the void left from the previous principals. Moreover, Robert lived very close to the school,
18 and he commented that a major reason for staying was because he enjoyed this connection.
19 For Robert, the community was home to him and his family, and he felt comfortable in the
20 town as both a principal and a parent, and this meant he was able to make sense of, and
21 navigate, his school context successfully.
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26 ***Transformation***

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28 At the start of his tenure, Robert felt that his biggest challenge was providing a sense of
29 stability and repairing relationships with parents, primarily due to the quick turnover of three
30 principals before him. The two parent interview groups explained that they had a strong
31 desire to be involved with the school because they had the capacity to do so, but their
32 fractured relationships with the school previously meant that they had minimal involvement
33 before Robert's appointment. Robert adapted his leadership practices to strengthen
34 relationships in the school so that everyone was working towards the same vision for success.
35 He acted as a healing principal, building trust with parents by inviting them into the school,
36 making himself highly visible in the school and in the community.
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40 Robert explained that this approach had allowed him to 'set the tone' in the school, which
41 was strengthened further by constant and explicit communication of the three school values:
42 (1) we show respect, (2) we are fair, and (3) we are learners. Robert modelled and reinforced
43 these values at school events, assemblies and in the newsletter, promoting a common
44 language around high expectations for learning and behaviour in the school was promoted
45 and continually celebrated by all stakeholders.
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48 Robert's initial years of principalship focussed on establishing the systems, procedures, and
49 relationships that were needed for everyone to work well together. The school was in a state
50 of crisis and was haemorrhaging student numbers, the teachers and parents did not trust one
51 another, there was no leadership stability in the school, and the school was directionless and
52 did not have a common vision for people to work towards. Large-scale changes were needed,
53 such as establishing stability, communicating a common vision, and bringing parents into the
54 school as important stakeholders. Once these large-scale changes had been made, Robert
55 implemented a slow change process, in which he was cautious and considered in his
56 approach. He believed that rapid change would disrupt the stability and maintenance of the
57 positive relationships that had been built in the school.
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3 Robert acknowledged and was appreciative of the experienced nature of his staff. Robert
4 explained that the instructional program in the school was driven by staff, and that he
5 believed his role was to act as a critical friend and to provide support to them. Reflecting this
6 belief, all six of the full-time staff interviewed at the school confirmed that they valued being
7 trusted with a high level of autonomy to teach how they wanted to teach in the school. This
8 was further supported through survey data, with all eleven respondents strongly agreeing
9 that, the principal trusts the staff to do their job well.
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13 14 ***Outputs (Success)***

15 Student performance on national tests of literacy and numeracy were well above national
16 averages, and, importantly, at or above that of schools with similar educational advantage.
17 There was a high level of stakeholder satisfaction, as shown in staff and parent survey results
18 which were consistently above state and similar school averages in areas such as student
19 connectedness (15% above state average), parent satisfaction (12% above), and teacher
20 satisfaction (10% above). Satisfaction with the school was evident in all interviews: the school
21 was described as friendly, welcoming, and warm by the three student groups; the two parent
22 groups described the school as supportive, friendly, and community oriented; and all staff
23 noted that the school felt positive and welcoming. Analysis of interview, observation and
24 survey data revealed six aspects of school success, which were: a safe and happy place to
25 learn and work; promotion of positive attitudes to learning; a cohesive school community;
26 development of the whole child; a focus on student voice and leadership; and school
27 reputation.
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34 **Robertson Remote School**

35 **The first school is a remote primary and secondary school in the Northern Territory led by**
36 **the principal, Fran.** This case is part of doctoral research that will be completed in 2025
37 (Author3, in progress).
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41 ***Inputs (context)***

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43 Robertson Remote School (RRS) is located in a town that is classified as very remote by the
44 Australian Bureau of Statistics. It is more than 500kms from the nearest regional centre and
45 is further isolated by seasonal flooding, restricting access by road for up to five months per
46 year. The town's residents are predominantly from a single Aboriginal language group, or clan,
47 who identified the area as their ancestral home.
48

49 RRS is a P-12 government school with 251 enrolled students in 2022, of whom 98% were
50 Indigenous and 96% were classified in the bottom quartile for educational advantage, with
51 the school under the first percentile. There were 16 fully qualified teachers and 8 Indigenous
52 assistant teachers.
53

54
55 Many students would attend infrequently, or consistently attend, but only for short periods
56 throughout the year: attendance was often below 40%, with less than 5% of students
57 attending school for more than 90% of school days, with this pattern similar to other remote
58 schools. As enrolments are linked to government funding, low attendance impacts school
59 finances. Most students plan to remain in the remote community after they complete school
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3 and don't aspire to further education or jobs that will require moving away from community.
4 This context requires an advanced knowledge of appropriate curriculum and pedagogies to
5 support students whose first language is not English, who may attend infrequently, and who
6 don't want university pathways.
7

8
9 Fran had served as principal of RRS for 10 years, with RRS being Fran's third remote school
10 principalship. Fran was seen as highly visible, reliable, caring, and passionate about student
11 learning. She visited every classroom every day, often spending time in classrooms to speak
12 with students about their learning. During staff professional learning, the principal was
13 actively engaged as a participant, learning alongside and encouraging teachers. Staff felt
14 supported by a principal that witnessed their day-to-day challenges in the classroom and
15 invested time in providing feedback and advice to ensure students were engaged and
16 achieving gains in learning. The principal's support extended to caring for the welfare needs
17 of students and staff beyond school. Participants noted, for example, that the principal
18 provided food for families who were isolating due to COVID and assisted teachers with
19 medical emergencies on a weekend. These examples suggested that the principal managed a
20 broad range of foci which, it could be argued, were outside of the scope of the principal role.
21 For Fran however, she believed that everything she did positively impacted student learning.
22
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24
25 As a government school, the principal is accountable to local and federal government laws
26 and policies related to schools. However, 98% of students are raised with an Indigenous
27 language and culture. The ontological and epistemological differences between school
28 families and government policy impacts Fran's leadership of the school. For example,
29 Traditional Owners (or Clan Elders) made up the school council rather than elected parent
30 representatives. Fran would build strong working relationships with Traditional Owners who
31 were interested in education, consulting them regularly on school operations and learning
32 programs. Mandated curriculum content was modified or ignored to provide time for cultural
33 learning and ensuring students attending school achieved curriculum outcomes which were
34 considered essential. An impact of the cross-cultural environment for non-Indigenous
35 teachers was that their own wellbeing needed greater support because, through the
36 remoteness of the location, they had removed themselves from their usual personal support
37 networks.
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42 43 **Transformation**

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45 Collaboration was an important aspect of Fran's work within the school and with the
46 community more broadly. Fran ensured that decisions about school programs were based on
47 evidence, and she frequently consulted staff about current and future needs of the school.
48 For example, teachers and assistant teachers provided feedback and suggestions during the
49 final staff meeting each term. Suggestions were discussed by the leadership team, who
50 reported back to staff on the outcome of every suggestion made.
51

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53 Less formally, but more frequently, Fran discussed school programs and her leadership
54 decisions with community leaders. Open dialogue about the impact on student learning of
55 cultural ceremonies was on-going and led to compromises on both sides, appeasing both
56 community leader's expectations of children's participation in cultural activities and the
57 principal's priority for education.
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3 Fran had a hands-on instructional improvement focus. Fran clearly and frequently
4 communicated her vision for student learning and the current school improvement focus. For
5 example, a numeracy expert facilitated training for staff during a curriculum day observed by
6 the researcher. Fran participated in the training and reviewed teachers' lesson plans,
7 providing feedback and advice.
8
9

10 She was also concerned with student wellbeing and through continual reinforcement and
11 consolidation of School Wide Positive Behaviour Supports (SWPBS), Fran fostered a positive
12 school environment, with disruptions to learning minimised and teaching time protected.
13

14 Fran strategically recruited motivated and committed staff, refusing to compromise on
15 teacher quality despite the difficulties in recruiting to remote locations and a national teacher
16 shortage. The principal personally oversaw the development of teacher capacity and
17 alignment of classroom programs with school goals, providing frequent mentoring for lesson
18 planning and feedback from observations of teacher practices. All teachers who were new to
19 this school started a probation process, regardless of their prior experience.
20
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22 Teachers in remote schools have often moved away from the social networks that support
23 their wellbeing and may find themselves isolated in an unfamiliar context. Fran mitigated
24 these impacts by providing regular social activities and personal support in times of crisis.
25 Staff reported they could rely on Fran and felt assured that it was never an imposition to
26 request help of any kind. This contributed to stability in staffing and sustainability of quality
27 instructional practices in classrooms.
28
29

30 31 **Success**

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33 The school was highly successful for students who attended. Aggregate student literacy and
34 numeracy results were similar to schools with a similar level of educational advantage, but
35 well below Australian averages. When asked about school success, many participants referred
36 to significant gains in academic outcomes of specific students with high attendance and these
37 comments showed a nuanced level of understanding about time in school and student
38 success.
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41 Ensuring a calm and safe environment for all students was another indication of success,
42 which strongly contributed to the academic gains for students. Teachers, parents and
43 students all spoke highly of the consistent approach to SWPBS which had been adopted when
44 Fran commenced. The regional director and assistant principal described the school as being
45 like a mainstream school, likening the classroom learning environment to successful urban
46 primary schools rather than their experience of other remote schools.
47
48

49 The school successfully equipped students with skills and knowledge to lead enriching and
50 purposeful lives as adults in their community. A parent noted how the skills her children were
51 developing meant they could help support the adults in the community. Each year a small
52 number of students graduated from year 12 with a completion certificate, which was noted
53 as a significant achievement by the regional director, who also noted that the school was
54 making sure that students were work ready. This was achieved via a targeted applied learning
55 program for students and ensuring that as many students as possible achieved age-
56 appropriate literacy and numeracy.
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3 **The school was also successful for staff, with staff feeling well supported by the principal,**
4 **in particular, through the principal's focus on ensuring non-local staff adapted well to the**
5 **remote area, daily support in classrooms from leadership for all staff, and an emphasis on**
6 **professional growth.**
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10 **Discussion**

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12 In this discussion, we want to extend the case analysis by connecting with Figure 1, showing
13 how the model can be used to illustrate individual schools, and showing how it can be further
14 developed.
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16 Context matters to educational success (*e.g.* Coleman, *et al.*, 1966; Teese and Polesel, 2003;
17 Sciffer *et al.*, 2022) and context and leadership have long been considered entwined concepts
18 (Author1, 2014; Author 1, *et al.*, 2019; Daniels, *et al.*, 2019; Hallinger, 2018). Hallinger (2018)
19 reinvigorated the debate about school context and leadership when he described a
20 conceptual model that utilised instructional leadership ideas, but which accounted for the
21 influence of seven contextual elements on school leadership: economic, political, socio-
22 cultural, community, personal, institutional and school improvement. The ISSPP had already
23 made substantial claims about context and leadership (Jacobson, 2011, Author 1 *et al.*, 2021),
24 to the point that Day (2005) and Author5 (2011) claimed that ISSPP principals were adaptive
25 and reflective, and worked with context, rather than being constrained by context. The three
26 cases confirm these observations and suggest that the type of school and school system, the
27 school's community (students, families, staff) and location were all important factors in terms
28 of how the principals led their schools; leading a Catholic school means there is a strong faith
29 element to the school (Author4, 2023), leading a rural school means understanding the
30 importance of how the leader fits with the community (Author2, 2024a), and leading a remote
31 Indigenous school means that learning programs need to be individualised to the students
32 and community. Importantly, there were qualities of the principals that helped them fit with
33 these school contexts such as Mark's Catholic Faith, Robert's place in the community, and
34 Fran's successful remote school experience. Working within different systems had strengths
35 and limitations and the principals were constantly having to work with, navigate and
36 challenge the systems. To illustrate this, resourcing levels were different across the three
37 schools, and these impacted on what programs could run in the schools, with, for example,
38 Robert working with a minimal allocation due the school's level of educational advantage and
39 having to work with the system to leverage greater support.
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46 The types of leadership practices seen in the schools were not dissimilar and they conformed
47 to the basic leadership practices noted by others (*e.g.* Leithwood and Sun, 2012), and evident
48 in previous analyses of ISSPP cases (*e.g.* Leithwood and Day, 2007; Jacobson, 2011), such as
49 establishing school direction, developing people, developing the school, and improving
50 teaching and learning. Yet each had unique elements like: Mark's focus on professional
51 learning communities to frame how people would interact with each other in the school;
52 Robert's focus on teacher empowerment; and Fran's focus on staff wellbeing and
53 development.
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56 As described above, Figure 1 captures much of the work of the principals and their schools'
57 successes, and this model has practical usefulness as it can be contextualised to school
58 contexts. As an example of applying our model to schools, Figure 2 is contextualised for PSCPS,
59 drawing from our previous research (Author1 *et al.*, 2024).
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5 Figure 2. Open Systems Model of Successful School Leadership for PSCPS

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10 Figure 2 provides the characteristics of the school, principal, staff and families that describe
11 what the school is – Catholic primary school with an experienced principal, an experienced
12 and committed staff, and supportive school community. The transformation part shows the
13 school’s particular emphases in teaching and learning – 21st Century learning, inquiry learning,
14 thinking curriculum, learning communities, emphasis on literacy, numeracy, socialisation and
15 faith - and describes the orientation to school direction and leadership that are important to
16 how the school has developed since its foundation in 2009: vision for a world-class school,
17 development of staff, partnerships with parents and community, leadership utilising PLCs,
18 middle leaders, strategic interventions and reflective practice. The outputs describe the
19 extent and type of student and school outcomes that are the measure of the school’s success
20 and without listing these again, the outcomes are broad and complex.
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24 We can also change and extend the model and provide more nuanced perspectives for a
25 school. Author2 (2024b) provided a version of Figure 1 that emphasised the need for change
26 - whether there was none, or a focus on production (steady change) or innovation (major
27 change). Figure 3 shows how Author2 and Author1 (2025) have taken this model and
28 incorporated ideas from the Weaving Circle for Systemic Impact model of Diaz-Gibson *et al.*
29 (2021) – *cultivating* relationships, *facilitating* systemic change, and supporting students to
30 *thrive* - to arrive at new model shown in Figure 3.
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35 **Figure 3** Open Systems Model of Successful School Leadership with Change Adaptation and
36 Weaving Circle based on Bandjina PS Findings.
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38 Place Figure 3 here
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42 Author2 and Author1 (2025) described how the model worked in the school. When Robert
43 started, the school was directionless and chaotic. He began by **cultivating** (Diaz-Gibson *et al.*,
44 2021) a climate that unified the school through establishing the need for change,
45 demonstrating a positive attitude to change, and building trust with parents through
46 empathy, high-visibility and constant communication of the school’s values and vision.
47 Concurrent to this, he began to facilitate and support change through focussing on building a
48 collaborative culture in the school, distributing leadership in the school and structuring the
49 organisation to facilitate collaboration (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020). After establishing the school
50 with a new sense of purpose and direction, Robert deliberately adopted a slower pace of
51 change, where any new innovations were considered carefully in terms of their impact on
52 students and fit with school direction; practices we have seen in other studies of principals
53 leading in a high principal turnover context for the first time (Author7, 2023). Robert had
54 acted as an ‘ecosystem gardener’ to transform the school and reach a new order, which
55 resulted in a more connected school community and a safe and happy learning environment
56 where teachers, students, and parents supported one another to **thrive**.
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3 In thinking about the findings from RRS, whilst we are yet to conceive of this in terms of a
4 development of Figure 1, the inputs in terms of the atypical school context – its location, staff
5 and community – become of utmost importance to what is done in the transformation stage
6 and the student and school outcomes achieved. For example, teaching needs to be more
7 personalised to fit with student attendance and family cultural practices, and care of staff
8 needs to be prioritised because of the remote nature of the school.
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11 Figures 2 and 3 attempt to use the ISSPP case study research to describe aspects of the
12 complex working of schools and how leadership and context are important elements to
13 consider for school success. They fit well with notions of complexity and clearly draw from
14 systems perspectives. They show complexity and systems through the many elements
15 described and through the interrelationships suggested between multiple parts of the
16 system; these models are not prescriptive but rather suggestive of how schools actually
17 operate, and this suggestive orientation fits well with the ambiguity of complexity views. They
18 are focussed mostly on the internal school context, and so fit within the inner layers of system
19 ecology perspectives that promote layering of context, such as Bronfenbrenner's (1977)
20 human development framework, and can be adapted to include other ecology perspectives
21 like that of Diaz-Gibson *et al.* (2021). Importantly, they also show that there are multiple
22 external contexts impacting on schools. These fit with the external contexts in the outer layers
23 of Bronfenbrenner (1977); although Figure 1 does not capture the time element of the
24 chronosystem layer; Figure 3 does this through its focus on change and cultivation. The
25 internal and external contexts provide parameters and influences on what is possible, and as
26 noted above, fit with the ISSPP description of how successful school leaders work with and
27 influence contexts to help their schools to be successful – for students, staff, families and the
28 school itself.
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33 As always, models are simplified representations of reality, and they need to be changed and
34 adapted over time to suit the changing needs and circumstances of schools and school
35 systems and the knowledge we have about successful schools and successful school
36 leadership. Nevertheless, we believe that the model shown in Figure 1 has wide
37 contemporary applicability as a general model of successful school leadership, and can also
38 be applied to individual school contexts to help school leaders understand the work they do
39 (Figure 2). As new knowledge is created, the model can be modified as shown in Figure 3, and
40 these modifications in time may lead to a new general model. Future research could focus on
41 new research and application of existing research to unpack the connections between the
42 various elements of the model, to produce a more complex and detailed model that might be
43 more predictive about practice and policy within schools and systems; figure 3 is an example
44 of this approach. The adaption of ideas from one field into another is often problematic, and
45 we have concern about the ISSPP's use of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) child development view,
46 the place of schools in this, and the focus on layering of nested influences. Nevertheless, there
47 is the potential for the ISSPP, through research such as that reported in this paper, to consider
48 how to develop this view for schools – e.g. the notion of multiple influences over time is
49 important, but we would not layer these and rather present them as a time series of system
50 views over a school's improvement journey.
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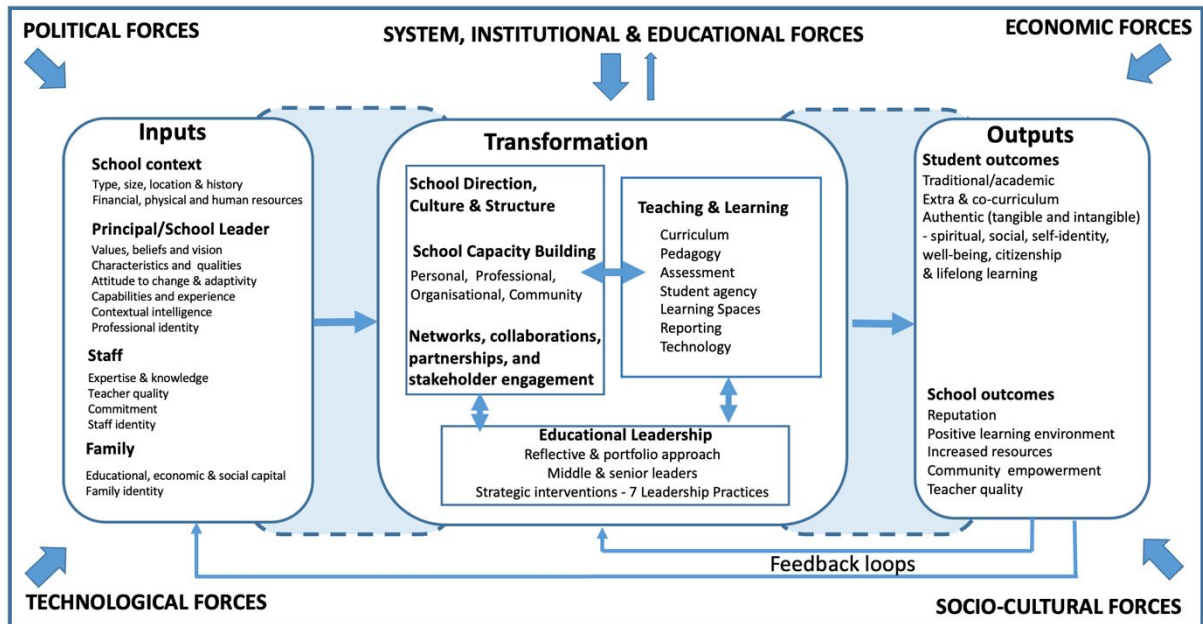
59 Author5 (2011)
60 Author6 *et al.* (2023)

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Context, leadership and school success: Australian suburban, rural and remote cases from the ISSPP

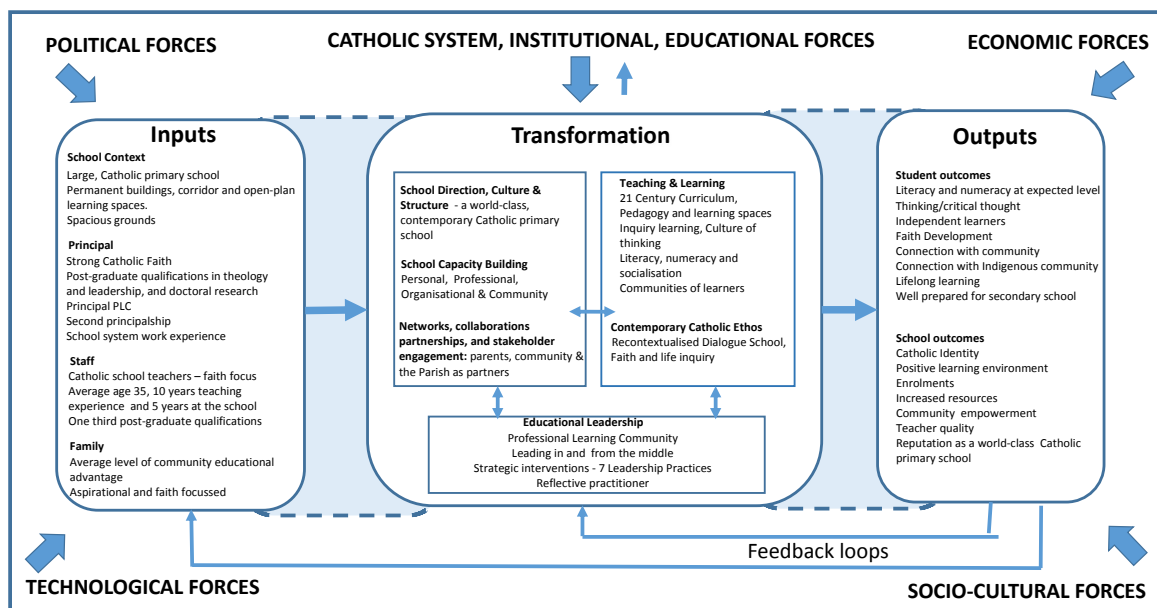
Figure 1: An open systems model of successful school leadership



(author constructed)

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Figure 2: Open Systems Model of Successful School Leadership for PSCPS

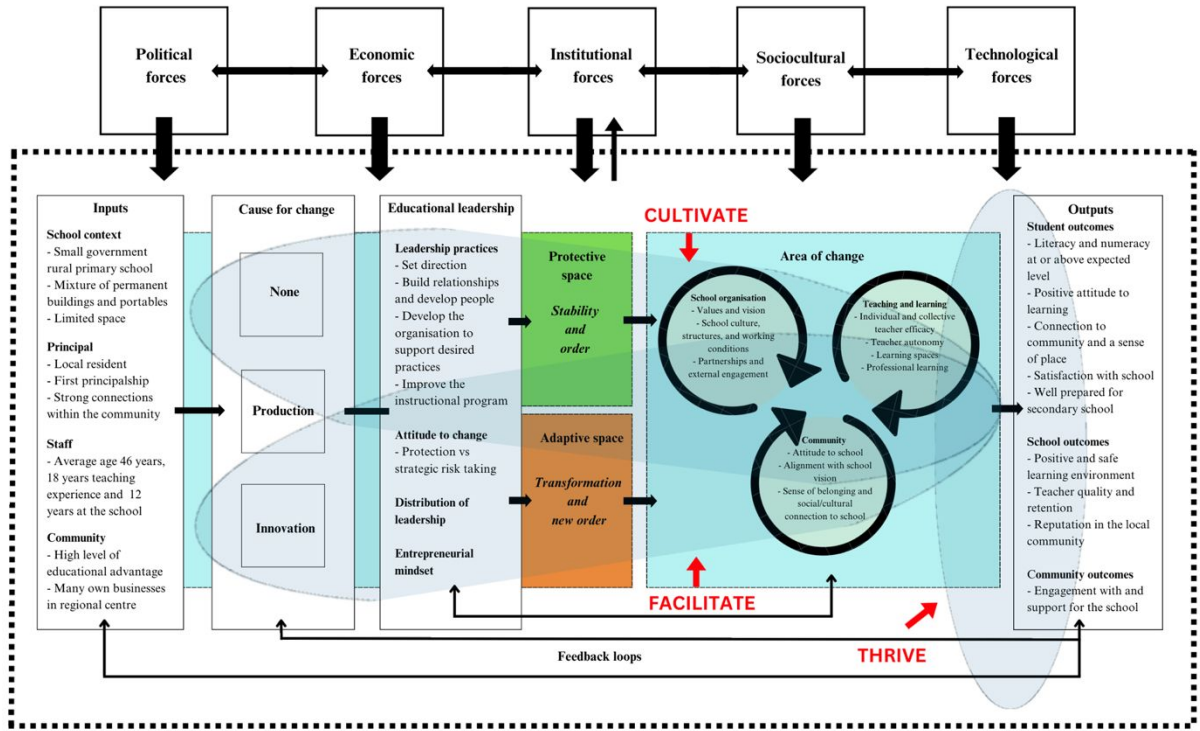


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Figure 3: Open Systems Model of Successful School Leadership with Change Adaptation and Weaving Circle based on Bandjina PS Findings.



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